



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING



Interview with Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad

Author(s): Hafiz al-Asad and Patrick Seale

Source: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Summer, 1993), pp. 111-121

Published by: [University of California Press](#) on behalf of the [Institute for Palestine Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2538092>

Accessed: 10-03-2015 19:27 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press and Institute for Palestine Studies are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Palestine Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

INTERVIEW WITH SYRIAN PRESIDENT HAFIZ AL-ASAD

[President Asad was interviewed by his biographer, the British author and Syria specialist Patrick Seale, in Latakia on 27 April 1993, the day the ninth round of peace talks opened in Washington. The text of the three-and-a-half hour interview was published on 10 May in al-Wasat in Arabic and in Mideast Mirror in English, and highlights were summarized by Mr. Seale in a New York Times op-ed dated 11 May. Writing in his own op-ed in the same paper on 19 May, Itamar Rabinovich, Israeli ambassador to the United States and Israel's chief negotiator with Syria, called the publication of these highlights "one of the most important developments of the [ninth] round of the Arab-Israeli peace talks. . . ."

Because of the key role of Syria in the Middle East equation, the critical juncture of the Syrian-Israeli peace talks, and the relatively limited exposure President Asad receives in the Western media, JPS has decided to print the interview, as printed in Mideast Mirror, in its entirety.]

The important news to come out of Damascus is that President Hafiz al-Asad, the ruler of Syria since 1970, is in good health. Next 6 October, he will celebrate his sixty-third birthday and, from what I have seen of him, I would judge that he has many more years of active life ahead.

When he received me (on 27 April) at his summer palace at Latakia—a well-guarded, one-floor residence, elegant yet of modest proportions, set a stone's throw from the Mediterranean in a large terraced park of flowers and fruit trees—his step was firm, his color was good and his eye as sharp and humorous as ever. He spoke with animation and almost without pause for some three-and-a-half hours. He seemed as alert and as incisive as at any time in the twenty years I have known him.

Far from being worn out by stress and anxiety, he gives every impression of relishing the great poker game in which he is now engaged with Israel, the United States and his

Arab partners—a poker game which is better known as “the peace process.”

I mention these details about President Asad's health for two reasons: one international, the other internal to Syria. As the central player in the Arab Middle East, Asad's health is of vast political importance. His disappearance from the scene would have an immediate impact, not just on the peace negotiations themselves, but indeed on every political relationship in an area spanning from Iran and the Gulf to North Africa.

Meanwhile, in Syria itself, the state of Asad's health is the subject of intense and fevered speculation in political and diplomatic circles. Ever since he suffered a short illness last December, diplomats and other observers in Damascus have been obsessed with the subject of who might succeed him and whether the transition of power will be smooth or stormy. Everyone has his own theory about which of the many barons of the regime, both civilian and military, stands the

best chance. Some believe Asad is grooming his son Basil to take over. Others suspect that, if anything were to happen to the president, his brother Rifat, now back in Damascus after his long exile, would make a bid for power, if he can first sweep aside the men who opposed him in the great succession crisis of 1984. Others still fear that the generals, whose strike forces underpin the regime, will fight it out, bringing the country to ruin.

In view of such widespread speculation, I was happy to note when I saw the president that the question of the succession in Syria is by no means an immediate one.

In the important interview that follows, President Asad spells out publicly, I believe in greater detail than he has done before, his vision of peace and his strategy for attaining it. He explains how he has seized the initiative with his formula of "full peace for full withdrawal"—a move which he describes as a great leap forward. By putting the ball firmly in Israel's court, Asad is challenging Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to demonstrate his readiness for peace.

As will be seen, Asad's tactics are flexible enough to keep Israel engaged, and the United States satisfied, with hints of separate, bilateral agreements, while his commitment to a comprehensive settlement is firm enough to reassure his Arab partners and ensure a solid Arab front.

The Battle for Peace

It is a tradition in Syria for the president to meet and pray with leading *ulema* at the time of Ramadan. This year the occasion was given considerable prominence. A larger number of *ulema* than usual was assembled to meet the president and the full prayer session was filmed and shown on Syrian TV—an indirect reminder to the public that Syria is one of the few countries of the region not disturbed by the wave of Islamic extremism.

In the interview, the president referred to his meeting with the *ulema*, and this may be an appropriate point at which to begin his exposition of his strategy—and of his philosophy—of peace:

President Asad: When I conferred with the *ulema* during Ramadan, I expressed the view that the battle we are now waging may prove to be more difficult than the military battle we waged in 1973 or the war of attrition which followed it.

In any conflict, in any struggle, there is a need for a variety of weapons, and not just for tanks and guns. In any such struggle, it is only natural that the warring parties will use—either totally or in part—every weapon

at their disposal. The important thing is to make sure that there is no contradiction between military and political aims. Otherwise there may be a loss of perspective.

We now assert that our aim is peace, and that peace must be comprehensive. In the past, we used to insist that peace should be arrived at through an international conference. We did not want the conference to be divided into bilateral committees, if that precluded overall coordination between the Arab parties. In all the speeches we made during visits paid to us by foreign leaders, and in our own visits abroad, we invariably stressed the need for such a peace conference. But even as we spoke, we were utterly convinced that Israel did not want peace.

Patrick Seale: Is that still your view today?

President Asad: If you had waited, I was about to answer that. We now say that we want peace and, in point of fact, we do not say anything which we do not truly mean. We do mean it. Such behavior may sound strange in today's world, where you might speak with a top official and, a mere hour later, hear him declare the very opposite of what he had told you.

The suspicions we had about Israel—that it does not want peace—these suspicions still stand. As evidence, one might point to the fact that the Israeli delegations at the first eight rounds of peace negotiations did not take a single step forward.

However, there is a phenomenon emerging in Israel which we may consider new, and which we have noticed particularly in the past two years. This is that the trend of opinion in Israel in favor of peace is growing. This phenomenon is bound to have an impact on Israel's rulers. We did not notice this trend in the past because, if the trend existed at all, it was very limited. But today, it seems to be gaining strength.

Of course the fanatics are still there, in the religious parties, for example, and even among the members of the Labor party—although, of course, not all of them.

At any rate, there is not the slightest doubt that we want peace. We would not otherwise have talked about peace for the past twenty years. Nevertheless, we will work to secure our rights and our goals. The peace we want must be just, it must be comprehensive, and it must be based on UN resolutions.

You have said that your policy is "full peace for full withdrawal." Does this remain your position?

Yes!

Can you spell out some of the steps towards

this objective? For example, if Israel were to recognize Syrian sovereignty over the whole of the Golan, what would Syria give in return? Would you agree to end the state of war?

When Syria put forward the notion of "total peace for total withdrawal" it was a great leap forward. It was intended to throw the ball into the Israeli court. We are waiting for an answer from the Israelis. The ball is now in their court, but they have not yet answered. So, until they do, any talk of later steps is meaningless. At any rate, this is not one of the current tasks of the political leadership. Such matters will have to be discussed at other levels. I advise you to discuss the question with the Israelis. Put the question to them! [Laughter]

You mean that I should ask them if, were you to agree to end the state of war, they would give up the whole of the Golan?

No! We proposed "full withdrawal in exchange for full peace." They have not agreed to this. That is why it makes no sense to ask hypothetical questions or raise possibilities when the other party has not agreed to the basic principle. If you and I were the belligerents, we could easily move on to subsequent questions!

You mentioned that there were new forces emerging in Israel . . .

People used to say that the problem between Syria and Israel was one of who would speak out first for peace. We have beaten them to it. We have gone ahead of them. We have spoken first. We presented the idea. It was not an idea current in the street, but we put it forward. We said this is an equation with two parts—"full peace for full withdrawal." We are in favor of this equation. But is Israel for it? That is the question.

As we have spoken first, those people who say that it is a question of who speaks first should know better. They should be better informed. Or do they perhaps want to make fools of the Arabs? In any case, they are mistaken.

When Israelis talk about peace with Syria, they often say they want a peace "which will stand on its own two feet." I suspect they really mean a form of separate peace. That would seem to be what they mean.

The peace process, as a whole, was based on the necessity of finding a comprehensive solution. It is there in the documents. So, if they have any notion of a separate peace, it would run contrary to the ground rules on the basis of which the peace process was launched in the first place.

From the beginning, we agreed that peace should be comprehensive. Recently, we heard anew from the Americans that a comprehensive peace remains the objective, and that the Israelis themselves have told the Americans that they too favor a comprehensive peace, or at any rate are not against it.

But it looks as if Prime Minister Rabin is not ready for full withdrawal from the West Bank. A senior Israeli official was recently reported as saying: "Syria won the battle for Lebanon, but we are not prepared to let that happen again with the Palestinians and Jordan."

What did he mean by that?

He seemed to be suggesting that the coming battle between Israel and Syria was over which of the two would draw the Palestinians and Jordan into its sphere of influence. I have heard some Israelis propose a trade: "If we give the Golan back to Asad and if we accept Syria's primacy in Lebanon, would he give us a free hand on the West Bank and in Jordan?"

[Laughter] Let's stick to the peace process between Israel and the Arabs. We are discussing the process in the light of the separate deliberations which the United States conducted with the Arabs and with Israel. It is in the interest of peace that we remain within this framework. The more we widen the subject, the greater the complications. What is important is that peace should remain the goal.

Would you agree that Syria and Israel are doomed to remain rivals, even if a peaceful settlement is reached?

Why?

Because of their geopolitical situation. They are like two kings on a chess board. Between them are three pawns: Lebanon, the Palestinians, and Jordan. Each king wants to control all the pawns. Would you agree that this struggle underlies the peace negotiations?

As I have said, in Israel itself there is a growing current in favor of peace, which demands peace. People who express such views—and they are growing in number—want peace between Israel and the Arab nation. Whatever anyone might say, the whole world knows that the Arab nation lives in this region. No one, in the East or West, can ignore the Arab nation, even though the Arabs may differ among themselves and may even, on occasion, fight each other. In the end, they will stand together.

This has nothing to do with the present collection of states and rulers. It represents the feelings of the people. Those were my own feelings when I was a child. I did not

acquire them from outside. They were my inner feelings. When I read of the heroic deeds of Antar, I used to feel drunk with excitement although I had touched neither arak nor wine. I was excited by our glorious past.

I am not describing fanatical nationalism. When you belong to a nation, you belong to it with your mind, your soul, your conscience, your emotions. The sense of belonging increases as the generations now alive wake up to their past under colonial rule, when they were poor, backward and fragmented. Such a situation stirs inner feelings, excites the conscience. Everyone wants to surmount obstacles that stand in the way of one's aspirations, of one's dignity and, in due course, of one's interests as well.

Just as you say there is a movement for peace in Israel, is there a movement for peace in Syria? Is public opinion here ready?

Everything we do in Syria is well-known to our people. Our policy concerning peace was not decided by a single man or a single institution. It was discussed year by year by children at school and by our parties and state institutions. If you want to be sure of this, talk to anyone.

Our complaint against the West is that it never seems to seek the views of our ordinary people. It seeks out just one man to talk to him about what it wants to hear [Laughter]. Representatives of the Western media come here simply to find confirmation of their preconceived ideas. This is my experience both with Western politicians and with journalists. They come with images of Syria in their heads and, as I've said, they look for some individual to confirm their prejudices.

So far as I know, we have never prevented anyone coming to Syria. Of course some have a grudge against us. They come here to serve our enemies. We are not talking about them. We are talking of people who really want to know the truth. But this is the way they go about their work. They don't address themselves to the masses of the people and their leaderships. They don't even seek to consult our political parties. The West talks a lot about parties, but when it wants to know what is happening in Syria, it does not go to our parties.

If you consult our parties in Syria—and there are seven of them—you will find that they are long-established movements. There are differences between them, but if you were to consult them about their attitude to the peace process you would find them expressing the same ideas, which they would defend with the same spirit. The same would be true

of our trade unions and popular organizations.

What helps in this respect is that, what we say in our contacts about the peace process, we also say to our own people. The views we have expressed from the start of the process after the Gulf war were first discussed inside the National Progressive Front and in the popular organizations. What we are now doing is the outcome of these deliberations.

This is not to say that 100 percent of all Syrians share the same uniform opinions. There are people in our country who say the Israelis do not want peace and that we should not, therefore, waste so much effort over it.

They maintain that the negotiations themselves represent a gain for Israel and a loss for the Arabs. Thousands of people hold such views, tens or perhaps even hundreds of thousands. But this has not led to serious splits or feuds inside our country. Because, in spite of differences of approach, no one person believes that another wants to forfeit our national rights. No such accusations are made.

Isn't it difficult for a Ba'hist or an Arab nationalist to accept Israel's presence in this region?

Ever since the establishment of the PLO, the PLO asserted and the Arabs eventually accepted that the PLO was the representative of the Palestinian Arab people. Many Arabs differed with the PLO—and this was reciprocated—but most of these differences remained within the bounds of brotherly sympathy. On this subject, there were certain basic things to which we were committed. So, when the PLO said that it wanted to reach a settlement on the basis of international resolutions, this view was shared by other Arab countries. This implied the adoption of a new position which was that Palestine contained both Arabs and Israelis.

So there was an acceptance of Israel's place in the region?

I am speaking about how the Palestinians see things. And, of course, Egypt also. Accepting the UN resolutions means that the Arabs have agreed, de facto, that both the Israelis and the Arabs have their place in Palestine.

I put these questions to you because Israelis often say, "Why doesn't President Asad make a gesture for peace? Why does he not make a statement which will help Rabin win over Israeli public opinion in favor of peace?" They are asking for something public. Perhaps, Mr. President, you have given us one gesture now!

[Laughter] When we speak about the

peace process, no one has offered anything for this process except Syria. The Syrian delegation at the talks was the only one that took an initiative. Israel offered nothing. In addition to the verbal exchanges, we put forward a document. The Americans described our initiative as "historic." That was the opinion of [former secretary of state] James Baker and of Lawrence Eagleburger, who succeeded him for a brief period.

You may recall that, before that, Israel rejected the American peace proposals. [Former prime minister Yitzhak] Shamir wrote a letter to the Americans to this effect. But we accepted the American proposals. Had we not done so, there would have been no peace process.

Now we speak about "full peace for full withdrawal." What have the Israelis offered in return? They have done nothing. The Israeli delegations sat with the Arab delegations and refused to discuss any of the substantive issues on the table. Instead they would say, for example, "What is the explanation of such-and-such a statement made on such-and-such a date?" or, "An Arab radio station has broadcast such-and-such a commentary. What do they mean by it?" And so forth. It was clear to the Arab side that the Israelis wanted to procrastinate and avoid dealing with the real issues.

At any rate, once the Shamir government fell the Israelis themselves admitted what they had been doing. Shamir said that he planned to waste time for ten years. No doubt he meant that, after a decade, people have come to accept his slogan of "peace-for-peace." The Israelis admitted that this was what they wanted.

We will see what the current round produces, now that the Rabin government is in power. We must wait and see. For their part, the Americans are expectant and optimistic. It seems that the Israelis are getting serious. The Americans themselves are getting serious and they report that the Israelis are too.

You said that you had received new pledges from the Clinton administration reaffirming America's commitment to Security Council Resolution 242. Can you confirm that?

The Clinton administration has declared that it is committed to resolutions 242 and 338 and to the principle of land-for-peace. This means that it is committed to the American initiative itself, and to the letters, the assurances and the letter of invitation on which basis the peace process was launched in Madrid. In other words, they are committed to the same things that prevailed under the pre-

vious administration.

Do you believe that you have made a good start with the Clinton administration?

We are for the peace process. And certainly this is going well with the Clinton administration. But, as is well known, peace is not an Arab interest alone. It is, of course, an Arab interest, but it is also an American interest, as it is in the interest of many countries around the world. The Americans have never suggested that the peace process was not in their interest. Quite the contrary, they have often assured us in the past that their interest lay in peace in this region.

To sum up, we feel comfortable with the present situation, because we detect a sense of seriousness in what we have seen so far of the Clinton administration.

Could I return for a moment to your relations with the PLO. You used to say that the Palestine problem was an Arab problem, and not simply a problem for the Palestinians. That is why you always opposed what was described as "an independent Palestinian decision."

In today's circumstances, would you be prepared to concede that the Palestinians have some independent right to negotiate as they please? Would you agree that they should get the best terms they can from the Israelis?

In anything that does not run contrary to Arab rights. We view the PLO like any other power that exists in this area. If we find that an Arab power forfeits Arab rights, we will oppose it. This has long been Syria's traditional position. We believe there will be no forfeiture of Arab rights so long as the Arabs cooperate and coordinate their strategies.

One of the concessions you made at Madrid was to agree that there would be no formal linkage between the various negotiating tracks—between Israel and Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinians. But you are suggesting there is an informal linkage.

No, the linkage is formal. Just a few days ago we were meeting in Damascus. [President Asad was referring to the meetings with Yasir Arafat and Arab foreign ministers.] Such meetings between us take place regularly, sometimes on a daily basis, according to the need and to what the delegations find necessary.

So that, in your view, is where linkage takes place?

No one suggested anything to the contrary. A few moments ago you mentioned the expression, a peace "which stands on its own two feet." Of course it must stand on its feet. It cannot stand on its head! [Laughter] Of course, bilateral agreements will stand on

their own feet. This does not negate the existence of the Arab nation! [Laughter] There is no contradiction here. When the Arab delegations negotiate over particular issues or local problems, each will eventually reach a bilateral agreement with Israel—when, that is, we eventually reach a peace agreement. In the end, there will be a number of bilateral agreements. But this will not affect the traditional heritage of all the parties concerned.

There are countries with a particular constitutional character. There are subjects of special interest to each government. But no Arab country has the right to infringe on the interests of any other. On this point, there is no misunderstanding among the Arabs.

Take the example of the disengagement agreements [negotiated after the 1973 war]. Egypt made such an agreement, and later we did so too. We did not like the Egypt agreement because it was reached under the pressure of war, and our two agreements were not exactly symmetrical. They were not replicas of each other.

You are saying that this is what could happen in the peace process?

Not necessarily. I was speaking about the disengagement of forces. That was some sort of truce. Now we are talking about peace. If everyone recognizes that peace must be comprehensive, the basic rules in each case will be similar—and yet, as I have said, this will be left to each country to apply individually, to Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and to the Palestinians. We all entered the peace process on the basis of 242 and 338.

The resolutions apply to all, but the mode of work may be different. And this applies particularly to the PLO. The agreement they are negotiating is aimed at establishing a regime of autonomy as a first step. In preliminary talks with the Americans, they agreed to a first phase of autonomy for the West Bank and Gaza, before moving on to determining the final status of these territories within a maximum period of five years.

Are you saying that Syria might reach an agreement with Israel before the final status of the West Bank and Gaza is determined?

The Arabs accepted that there must first be an agreement on Palestinian autonomy—but that this first stage must be linked to the final status of the occupied territories and that everything which is implemented must fall within the framework of Security Council Resolution 242.

Needless to say, other countries do not have to pass through an autonomy stage.

Israel is not offering autonomy to Syria or to South Lebanon! [Laughter]

So there is a discrepancy between the timetables of the various tracks?

Yes, but even this will be agreed upon between the Arabs themselves. What is important is that we must be absolutely certain that the whole process aims at achieving a comprehensive peace.

So you are saying that the tracks can move at different speeds?

Perhaps. But this is a matter of only minor tactical importance. Consider, for example, that the delegations are talking in Washington. At one time, they said that the Palestinian track was moving rapidly ahead. Should that have bothered us? On the contrary. It is in our interest if they move quickly ahead. Later on, it was said that the Syrian track was advancing swiftly. The fact is that with delegations negotiating in separate rooms, it is impossible to have 100 percent coordination of the actual words used, especially as each delegation focuses on its own local issues. So there are bound to be differences.

Beyond the tactical differences you have mentioned, is there not, Mr. President, a point of substance? If Syria reaches an agreement first, and is removed from the equation, will the Israelis not then find it easier to deal with the Palestinians and even with Jordan? It seems to me that that is Israeli strategy. That is what they mean when they talk of a peace "which will stand on its own two feet." They mean peace with Syria with no links to other tracks. I am sorry to press this point, but it is a subject everyone is talking about.

No problem.

At what stage of the Palestinian process will you agree to sign?

Suppose that the Palestinians sign a peace agreement tomorrow. Does that mean that all strings are cut between us and the Palestinians? If Lebanon makes peace tomorrow—and I would like that to happen—does it mean that we will be cut off and that Lebanon will no longer be of any benefit to Syria?

It depends on what deal the Lebanese strike. If they sign a treaty like the 17 May 1983 accord

... Then we will make war on them! [Laughter] I said that no one must harm the other.

So that is your basic principle?

Why did we fight against the 17 May accord? When Lebanon concluded that agreement, it harmed itself. The Lebanese negotiators harmed Lebanon. It is our view—and it

is something history has taught us—that when Lebanon is harmed, we are harmed also. When a country harms another country, it harms itself.

May I summarize your position, Mr. President, to see if I understand it properly? You are saying that the tracks can proceed at different speeds. That individual bilateral agreements can be reached, so long as there is no harm to Arab interests, and so long as the final aim is a comprehensive settlement.

No, I am not saying that. Different speeds, yes. As for the rest, we will see later. We will have to see whether or not the different speeds lead to agreements at different points in time. When we reach this stage, we will consider whether some of the participants should sign bilateral agreements and whether or not these will serve the collective interest of everyone. Will it serve the peace process or not? Will there be guarantees that the others will also reach the same goal? Other factors will also be taken into consideration.

We will make our decision on the basis of the negotiations and deliberations as they proceed. I have spoken only about the speeds of the different tracks. Only that.

But no signing?

We will discuss it in time. The process has not yet moved beyond the starting point, and you are enquiring about the end of the process!

I remember Your Excellency saying something similar about President [Anwar] Sadat—that he began the negotiation when he should have ended, that he had reversed the proper order of things.

That is right.

Can I ask you, Mr. President, a question about your relations with the Islamic movement? What is extraordinary about your position is that you are on friendly terms with Hamas, but you also receive Mr. Yasir Arafat in Damascus. You are close to Iran, Sudan, and Hizballah, but you are also friendly with Egypt and Algeria who are both struggling with Islamic extremists at home. I admire your diplomatic skill, but how do you explain the contradiction?

There is no contradiction. There is nothing strange about it. There are different forces at work, each with its own view of things, and differing to a greater or lesser extent from the others. At times, common denominators, or at least an absence of contradiction, allow such forces to coexist with each other. Relations can be friendly, and cooperation is possible, when there is something in common.

In the case of forces in the Arab arena, everyone is working to liberate his land although the methods used may be different. I see no justification in wasting our resources on marginal problems or on problems which have no present priority, whether in Syria or in the Arab world as a whole. Coexistence between forces is possible in spite of such differences.

Your Excellency is talking about Islamic forces and nationalist forces?

Among other things.

Do you see a difference, for instance, between organizations like Hizballah and Hamas which are fighting foreign occupation, and organizations like Egypt's Jama'at al-Islamiyya and Algeria's FIS which are fighting their own government inside their own country?

Of course. Hamas and others are fighting against occupation and colonization. They are fighting to defend their own homes. The others are fighting for other causes.

This is one of the striking features of your diplomacy—that you are at present on good terms with practically everybody!

Al-Hamdulillah! [Laughter] By the blessing of God!

I mean Lebanon is quiet; Iraq is weak; Egypt is friendly; Saudi Arabia and the Gulf are grateful for your stand in the Gulf war; Iran is your ally. Even the Western powers are not so hostile to you and they recognize Syria's central role in the peace process. It seems that inside Syria your popularity is at an all-time high! [Laughter] *You seem to be in a very strong position.*

Being in a strong position is not my primary aim. My aim is that I should be able to serve the people of whom I am a citizen, and the nation to which I belong, by doing my duty. At the same time, we in Syria do not disguise our feelings towards those who wish to destroy Arab values, or speak softly of them. Nor do we bend before those foreign powers which adopt a biased attitude towards the Arabs.

This apart, we want to live as a nation in the midst of this modern world. We want to cooperate with others, to serve mutual interests—our own and those of others. Each should respect the will and the opinions of others, and the dignity of everyone should be protected in the interests of everyone, and we should always seek to resolve our differences on the basis of international law and conventions. Thus we strive to achieve a lasting peace everywhere in the world, our region included.

It is often said that Your Excellency is perhaps the one man which can bring peace to this

region.

In Israel, however, there are a number of men who don't seem to want to bring peace to this region.

Like Binyamin Netanyahu, the new leader of the Likud?

For example. It seems that Shamir was better!

Would you agree that Prime Minister Rabin seems to be squeezed between Netanyahu on the one hand and the Islamic radicals on the other? His freedom of maneuver is small.

Nothing is without difficulty. But if peace is more precious than these problems, then peace should be pursued and deserves to be pursued. If peace is in the interest of all the peoples in this region, then it must be sought after. If peace is not a priority, however, then we will be faced with a quite different situation altogether.

People used to say that the Israeli Right was incapable of making peace with any Arab country. [Menahem] Begin, for example, used to dream of Greater Israel, of restoring the Israel of the Torah. But, nevertheless, he took a certain step. Regardless of what one might think of that step, the fact is he took it.

Yes, he did.

I mean the step he took with Egypt.

Yes, he took Egypt out of the equation, just as Rabin would now like to take Syria out.

No! Thank God we are walking together in the peace process. All the Arabs are moving together. Moreover, it is not in the interest of Rabin himself to fragment peace, just as it was not in Begin's real interest to cut peace into pieces. The trouble was that Begin viewed the problem tactically rather than strategically.

Egypt was an Arab country, and it will remain one. Perhaps you have heard me say so. Today we have no differences with Egypt, but perhaps you heard me say the same thing when there were differences between us. It is not easy for a man to get out of his own skin.

Any peace which is not comprehensive will not last. Syria could have concluded a bilateral agreement with Israel a long time ago. It could have done so by itself. But we did not think that such an act would have been to the benefit of the people of the region.

In any event, speaking of a separate peace is no longer appropriate in the context of the efforts now being made. Once we embarked collectively on the process, the idea of a separate peace was no longer relevant. In this conflict, we have agreed on what foundations

to rely and we have also, to a large extent, defined the road we are to follow to our goal.

Consequently, even if one of the parties signs a separate or bilateral agreement, it could no longer be called a separate peace. Many years ago, if one of the countries had wanted to make a separate deal, it might have been possible for it to do so. But we have all waited to begin the march of peace together. And as we are all involved in the process, the chances of success are greater. Our ability to overcome difficulties has been enhanced, while our skill in avoiding future risks has improved. These factors work in favor of all those who want peace.

The last time a separate deal was concluded it did not bring peace to the region. On the contrary, it gave birth to several wars.

Is Your Excellency looking beyond a peace settlement to the situation after peace has been achieved?

Of course.

Are you preparing your country for such an eventuality?

Yes. We never, during our leadership, took a single step forward if we believed our people were moving in the opposite direction. Had we done so, any peace we might have achieved would have been false. I am not saying this for the sake of it. We want all our people to know what is going on.

When I speak to foreign leaders, in every word I utter I take into account that millions of people are listening. I am aware that any mistakes in this matter could have dire consequences, for the man who makes such a mistake and for the country as a whole.

That is why we conduct discussions at grassroots level, with popular organizations, with trade unions, with other parties, and also with people who do not belong to any party. As I said, not everyone is convinced. There are some people who object.

Are your current moves to liberalize the Syrian economy linked to your vision of a peace settlement? Do you want to make the economy more competitive? Are you considering further liberalization?

We began this trend in the late 1980s before the peace process got under way. We passed a number of laws with a particular objective in mind. We support the private sector, but there are those who favor the joint sector, and others still who believe in the public sector.

In our planning, we proceeded on the basis that no one sector could of itself meet the people's needs. Taken individually, no single

sector could stimulate the required development. There are many capable people in this country. The question is how to mobilize them within the development framework.

So we decided to promote and encourage all three sectors. No one can now claim that he cannot find a sphere suitable to his own inclinations and ways of working.

Today, the private sector is moving at a quicker pace. A great number of small projects have been launched and quite a few big ones as well. No doubt, with the passing of time, the private sector will grow more confident. The business community is now well represented in our political system, several of its members having been elected to the People's Assembly at the general elections.

In my opinion, there is a parallel between economic and political problems. Just as in countries with a single party system, the party is unable to mobilize the energies of all the people—although there are different opinions on this subject in our party and government—so a single economic sector cannot mobilize the entire potential of a country.

With the rapid growth of population, the state seems unable to cope fully with the demands for education and social services. Do you think the private sector could enter such fields?

We already have a number of private schools, but perhaps not enough. We would allow more to be opened. As for services, in the field of health there are already a good number of private hospitals, including some large ones. When I had a health problem (in 1983) I went to a private hospital—the Shami.

I am glad to see that the President does not need to think about hospitals any more. [Laughter] Your health seems very good.

Al-Hamdulillah. But the years are beginning to weigh heavily.

You look in very good health.

One reason is that I have been resting here (in Latakia). I can do some of my work here, but there are other sorts of work which I cannot do here. Yesterday, however, I signed more letters here than I usually sign in Damascus in any one day. There was a great pile of them. I did not leave my office before 9:30 in the evening.

May I interject to ask whether you are proposing to give more power to the parties who make up the National Progressive Front? At the moment they don't seem to have much power.

I think these parties have real authority. They participate in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the country and in

the decisions which affect everyone's destiny.

They monitor government business. On several occasions, discussions of actions and policies have taken place at their request. They participate in all institutions and establishments. In some countries, some parties spend decades without having any impact on public life.

During the [1973] October war, the central leadership of the National Progressive Front was mobilized and put on the alert and followed the course of the war as a political leadership. Every day, I used to leave my military command post in order to brief them in detail—giving them bad news as well as good. And I used to consider what decisions they wanted taken.

At the end of the war I did not accept Security Council Resolution 338 before holding more than one meeting with the Front's leadership.

What more authority would you want them to have, except for me to say to them, "Goodbye! I am going home and you take over!" [Laughter]

Nothing prevents them from expressing their opinions on how they see things. When we meet, everything is laid out openly, a practice we established immediately after the Corrective Movement. Not one member of these parties has been arrested for his activities within the Front.

In prison, you mean?

Yes, in prison. I say this because you may think that they take part because of intimidation. To arrest someone is not something natural. But people are not all angels. Even in these parties, you might find a criminal from time to time, who would have to be dealt with. All I was saying was that no one has been arrested because of his opinions.

I am stressing this point to make clear that there is no stick raised over their heads. If we wanted to threaten them with the stick, why did we go to the trouble of seeking their agreement? Had we brought them into the Front by force, they would not have been any use. We wanted them to join out of conviction.

The history of Syria has shown that this country cannot be governed by force. In the days when regimes used to change every few months, those that fell soonest were those that used force.

Husni Za'im [who ruled Syria briefly in 1949] put up a gallows in his first days in power, and then went on to hang forty or fifty people in a single day. It was the talk of the whole country. But Za'im only lasted two or

three months.

The same applies to France that colonized Syria between the world wars. It was one of the great powers. It had technology, wealth and weapons. It had emerged victorious from World War I. But it faced revolts against its rule every few months. At one time there were no fewer than thirty-three uprisings in various parts of the country. France clearly had no intention of quitting after a mere twenty years, but she eventually had to pull out. Syria is a country that cannot be ruled by violence.

If Your Excellency will allow me to say it, the rumor in the city is that the president is here in Latakia because he is planning some big change.

[Laughter] What kind of change are they talking about?

They are talking about reforms. They are talking about curbing corruption by top people, and the misbehavior of the children and grandchildren of top people. The rumor is that the president wants to retire some of these people, honorably, to protect Syria from external pressures on such questions as drugs and corruption.

Our people are always thirsty for something new. What is certain is that I don't know any other country that fights corruption the way we do here in Syria. When I hear accusations against us from outside, I realize they are politically motivated.

Smuggling in Syria is a problem, as we are surrounded by neighbors. Many smuggling operations have been foiled and the courts pass stiff sentences on those who are caught. But smugglers are often fierce and are usually armed. There have been a number of clashes with security forces, with people killed on both sides.

As for misconduct in high places, I don't think there is a country in our region which put on trial and sentenced a minister to fifteen years in prison for misconduct. In 1987, the then minister of agriculture, Dr. Mahmud al-Kurdi, was held responsible for misconduct at his ministry and sent before the courts even though he was a Ba'hist of long standing and a man of hitherto unblemished record.

In addition to his case, the relatives of a number of high officials have also been sent to prison, and are still inside. I don't want to mention every case. A number of people have even been condemned to death for abuse of power.

In Syria we have a natural revulsion against drugs, which causes us to despise those who take them or traffic in them. There are also religious objections to drugs.

Smugglers deal in drugs, but this is no reason to accuse Syria. Throughout its whole existence, Syria has never grown such crops. I am sorry to say that Lebanon did so in the past, and that smugglers have used Syria as a country of transit.

When we ask those who accuse us for their evidence, all they can say is the Biqa' Valley. I ask them, "Did we go into Lebanon simply to chase smugglers, or did we intervene in order to solve a political problem and end the civil war?"

Nevertheless, in recent years we have helped the armed forces of Lebanon to comb the region. As far as we know, Lebanon is no longer a country where hashish is grown in any quantity. But of course smuggling is something which continues.

Our real fear was for our soldiers, who live among the people in Lebanon where drugs have for a very long time been a source of income. Very fortunately, drug use has not spread to our army. As far as I know, the use of drugs in Syria is on a very small scale. It is probably less of a problem here than in any other country, and certainly less of a problem than in the United States which is one of the biggest consumers in the world.

May I end this interview by changing the subject? Syria was known as a friend of the Soviet Union for many many years. How big a shock to you was the collapse of the Soviet system? And how soon did you grasp what was happening?

Many people say that the Soviet collapse, and the consequent change in the international balance of power, were among the factors which persuaded you to join the peace process at Madrid and before that to join the [U.S.-led] coalition against Saddam Hussein.

I sensed from the beginning where things were heading. This was not prophecy—no one could have predicted the course of events in any detail—but the Soviet Union's decline was apparent to me. I could see that large-scale changes were in the offing which we needed to take into consideration, and which would have an impact on the whole world, and not just on us. In fact, the negative impact, both economic and political, has been felt around the globe. It has even harmed the enemies of the Soviet Union. The socialist camp was a great productive and consuming power. Its sudden withdrawal from the world economic system was, in my opinion, a major contributing factor to the economic crisis which much of the world has suffered.

Did Syria suffer much?

In my view we suffered a good deal less than many Third World countries, and cer-

tainly less than the countries of the socialist bloc.

Why was that?

Because we were not in the Soviet orbit. We were friends. We had mutual interests. But we were not a burden on them nor them on us. Our system was not a replica of theirs, neither internally nor externally. We took our own decisions. This was the case from the very beginning in 1970.

I used to appreciate the strong Soviet stand on our behalf, but we were not part of the Soviet world system.

It is a mistake to suggest that we joined the peace process because of the Soviet collapse. In fact we went to Madrid when [former Soviet president Mikhail] Gorbachev was still in power. The Soviet collapse had not yet taken place. What persuaded us to go to Ma-

drid was evidence of new American seriousness, and in particular the text of the American initiative which struck us as fair.

I first met [former U.S. secretary of state] Henry Kissinger when he came to Syria towards the end of 1973 after the October war. I remember he told me he wanted to begin our talk with a review of events around the world. He began at once to praise Syria for its independent, nationalist policy. He said something to the effect that Syria charted its own course and did not fall into the orbit of others. It was obvious that he meant the Soviet Union.

I thanked him for his remarks. But I seized the opportunity to say that he should not, therefore, expect us to gravitate into the American orbit!