

Prospects for the Clinton-Assad Meeting:

Lessons from the Past

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Brief Analysis

On January 13, 1994, Dr. Joseph Sisco, undersecretary of state for political affairs in the Nixon and Ford administrations; Dr. William Quandt, member of the National Security Council staff during the Nixon and Carter administrations; and Dr. Richard Haass, senior director for Near East and South Asian affairs at the National Security Council during the Bush administration, addressed a session of The Washington Institute's Policy Forum. The speakers offered their analysis of the three previous meetings between an American president and Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in light of the forthcoming Clinton-Assad meeting. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JOSEPH SISCO

President Nixon's 1974 meeting with President Assad followed the achievement of a disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria. The Nixon administration viewed that meeting as an opportunity to underscore the U.S. role in the region. Unlike other summits, it was an attempt to initiate diplomatic relations rather than achieve a breakthrough in relations.

The exchange that took place between President Nixon and President Assad is instructive. Assad understood when questions were being avoided and he was not satisfied when Nixon spoke in generalities, such as the importance of the peace process. In particular, Assad was looking for an American commitment on two levels. First he wanted the United States to pressure Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights. Second, Assad wanted the United States to, at the very least, make a commitment to support the Syrian view that Israel must withdraw. While Nixon had no intention of making these commitments, he stumbled in his attempt to express understanding for the Syrian view, thereby leading Assad to believe that Nixon supported an Israeli withdrawal.

The basic lessons to be drawn from the Nixon-Assad meeting are: be careful of what one says and does not say; be sure of how one uses code words; and resist any temptations to give lengthy answers to simple questions, which will allow Assad to draw his own interpretations to be used for his own purposes. It is likely that in Sunday's meeting Assad will ask President Clinton for a commitment similar to that which he asked of President Nixon; Assad, then and now, does not make any sharp distinctions between Labor and Likud or between Israeli and U.S. policy. An end to the Arab boycott is not likely to result from the summit, although Assad may indicate that peace can pave the road toward an end to the boycott.

In the Geneva meeting, President Clinton should have the following objectives: First, he should reaffirm categorically that the American objective is a comprehensive peace, which will underscore the United States' seriousness vis-à-vis the Syrian track. Second, he should reconfirm the U.S. role as an honest broker that helps Israel and the Arabs to make peace but which cannot substitute for them. Third, he must be aware that Assad attaches importance to diplomatic relations with the United States. Assad keeps the Egyptian-Israeli model of peace in mind, and seeks improved economic relations with the United States as an accompaniment to peace; he also welcomes U.S. policy on

the dual containment of Iraq and Iran, which serves Syrian interests as well.

WILLIAM QUANDT

In the Carter-Assad meeting on May 9, 1977 Carter's purpose was to demonstrate that he was personally interested in Arab-Israeli peacemaking, and he wanted to identify possible common ground on three issues: the nature of peace; the territorial/security nexus; and the Palestinian issue. He was aware that Assad was a hard-headed realist, who would do business if the time was right, and he also realized that Syria's participation was vital to achieve a comprehensive agreement. Where Carter faltered was in appearing overly friendly and too eager to achieve peace, implying that the United States was willing to make far-reaching efforts to coax the parties to agreement. In retrospect, he also erred in discussing with Assad steps that the PLO should take to trigger its participation in the peace process. Only later did he realize that Assad had no intention of helping the PLO.

In his meeting with Carter, Assad affirmed two principles at the core of his perception of a peace settlement: Israel must fully withdraw from the territories it acquired in 1967 and Palestinian rights must be restored. Assad described peace as the end of a state of war, with normalization only possible with the passage of time. He indicated that it is inconceivable to premise an agreement on the expectation that psychological changes will take place. On the Palestinian issue, Assad offered no proposed solution.

Three aspects of the Carter-Assad meeting are especially noteworthy. First, while the meeting took place one week prior to the Israeli elections of 1977, there was no mention of the elections at the meeting, in part due to an incorrect American assumption that the Labor party would remain in power. Second, one concrete development that came out of the meeting was Syria's commitment to release a number of Syrian Jewish women. Third, Carter's congeniality with Assad led Israelis and Egyptians to be concerned that the United States was becoming too focused on Syria.

Approaching the Clinton-Assad meeting, it is important to recall that there is enormous asymmetry in the structure of any meeting between an American president and a Syrian president. For Assad, a meeting with an American president is an historic, momentous event. Assad enters the meeting thoroughly prepared; an American president will view the meeting as less significant and will undoubtedly be less prepared. As a result, it is critical that Clinton know what he wants out of this meeting and that he control the substantive agenda. One thing is clear: While Assad will foreshadow positions he intends to take, he must be persuaded that the meeting is serious before he decides what he will contribute.

RICHARD HAASS

The Bush-Assad meeting on November 24, 1990, was different than the previous U.S. summits. Unlike the others, this meeting was not dominated by the peace process, but rather took place in the context of the Gulf crisis. Moreover, the geopolitical context had changed with the demise of the Soviet Union, shifting the "correlation of forces" in favor of the United States.

The Bush administration had one goal for the meeting -- to lock in Syria's participation in the Gulf War coalition. There was concern abroad about the United States' ability to manage politics in the Arab world, and having "radical" Syria on board would help give the United States credibility in the region. In fact, one of the tenets of the Bush administration's policy at the time was to put the peace process on the "back burner" since Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was trying to use it to drive wedges in the Gulf coalition. At the time, Washington believed that there would be new opportunities for peace after the Gulf War.

The Bush-Assad meeting was not a negotiation and no deals were reached. In effect, the meeting was a consultation and in many ways a confidence-building measure that enabled each leader to take the measure of the other. Many issues were covered in a relatively short amount of time, including: the Gulf crisis, the peace process, Lebanon, terrorism, and Soviet Jewish emigration to Israel.

It was apparent that meeting with an American president was very important for Assad and that he enjoyed the "verbal dueling" that took place. Assad is an astute student of politics and he understood where the balance of power was in the region and in the world. He also understood that it was in his best interest to move away from the radical Arab world and side with the American coalition.

Generally speaking, American meetings with Syrians are good ideas. The United States' ability to wield influence in the Middle East with regard to a number of issues depends on how we are perceived. The meeting is an opportunity for each side to hear each other out and build up some measure of confidence. Clinton's decision to meet with Assad is of a piece with the Bush administration's policy of attempting to engage Syria. Diplomacy today is an investment that can yield positive results over the next three years of Clinton's presidency. In the case of Assad, it may prove worthwhile in the future to make Assad feel now that he is not being ignored in light of recent developments on the Palestinian track.

President Clinton should remember the purpose of his meeting with Assad, which is not to negotiate but rather to impress upon Syria the basic outlines of U.S. policy and the depths of U.S. seriousness. In this context it would be a mistake for the United States to attempt to link progress on two levels or to "sweeten the deal" with rewards, but there is no harm in attempting to make the Syrians realize that a change in their policy on issues like terrorism and human rights would be in their best interest for the future. Clearly, the meeting is asymmetric in that it is one item on a foreign trip for Clinton, while it is Assad's main focus. Clinton must take care to not just listen; he should not hold back in letting Assad know what U.S. expectations are for peace between Israel and Syria, and he must appear no hungrier for peace than is Assad. Real success on Clinton's part will be measured by his ability to convey to Assad that the United States is interested in that part of the world, that the United States is prepared to provide resources, and that Assad has no where else to go.

This special forum report was prepared by Jennifer Sultan. ❖

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