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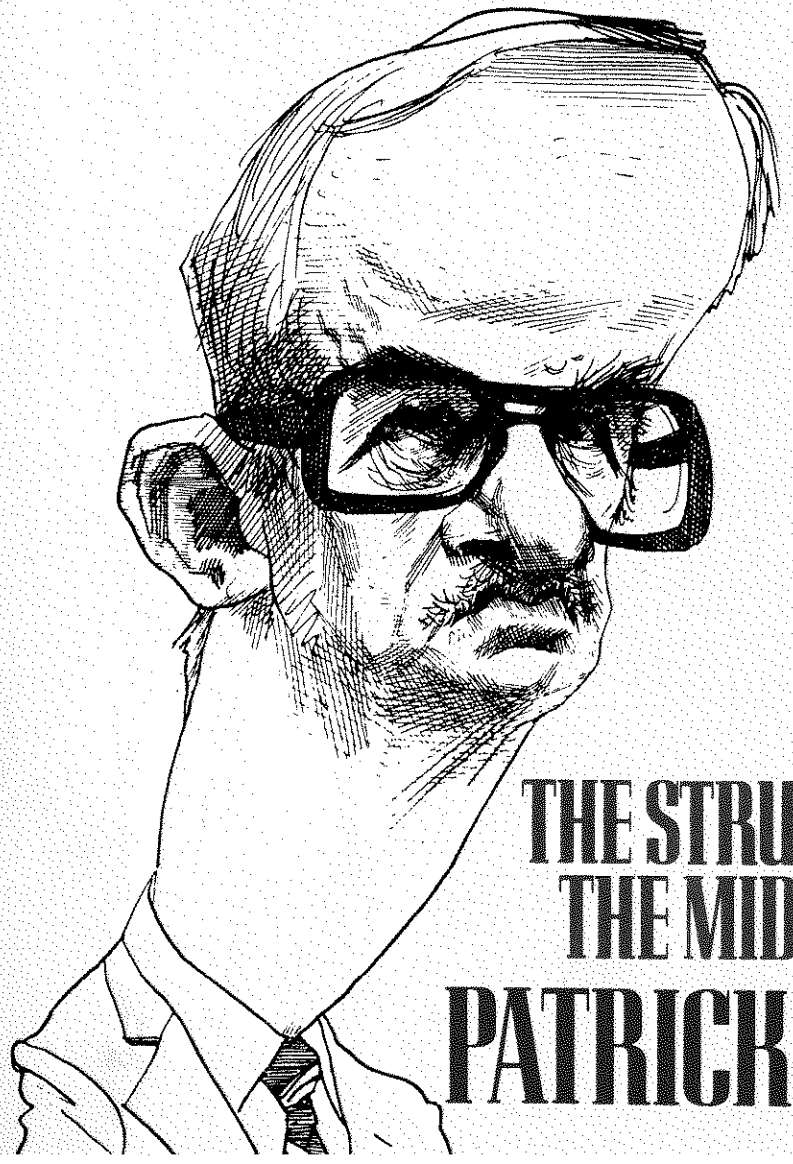

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

PATRICK SEALE

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ASAD

OF SYRIA

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

Patrick Seale

with the assistance of
MAUREEN McCONVILLE

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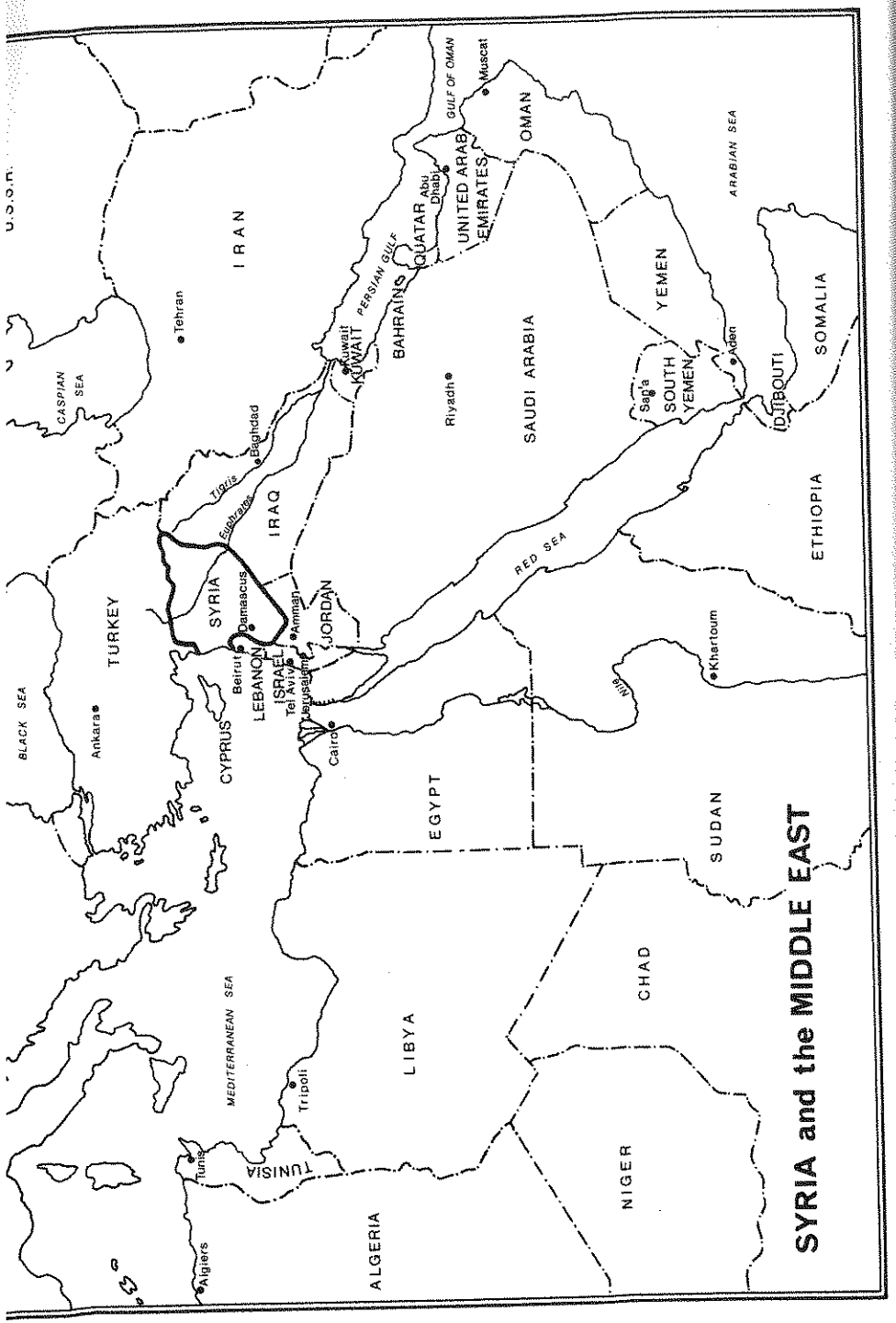
To Rana Kabbani



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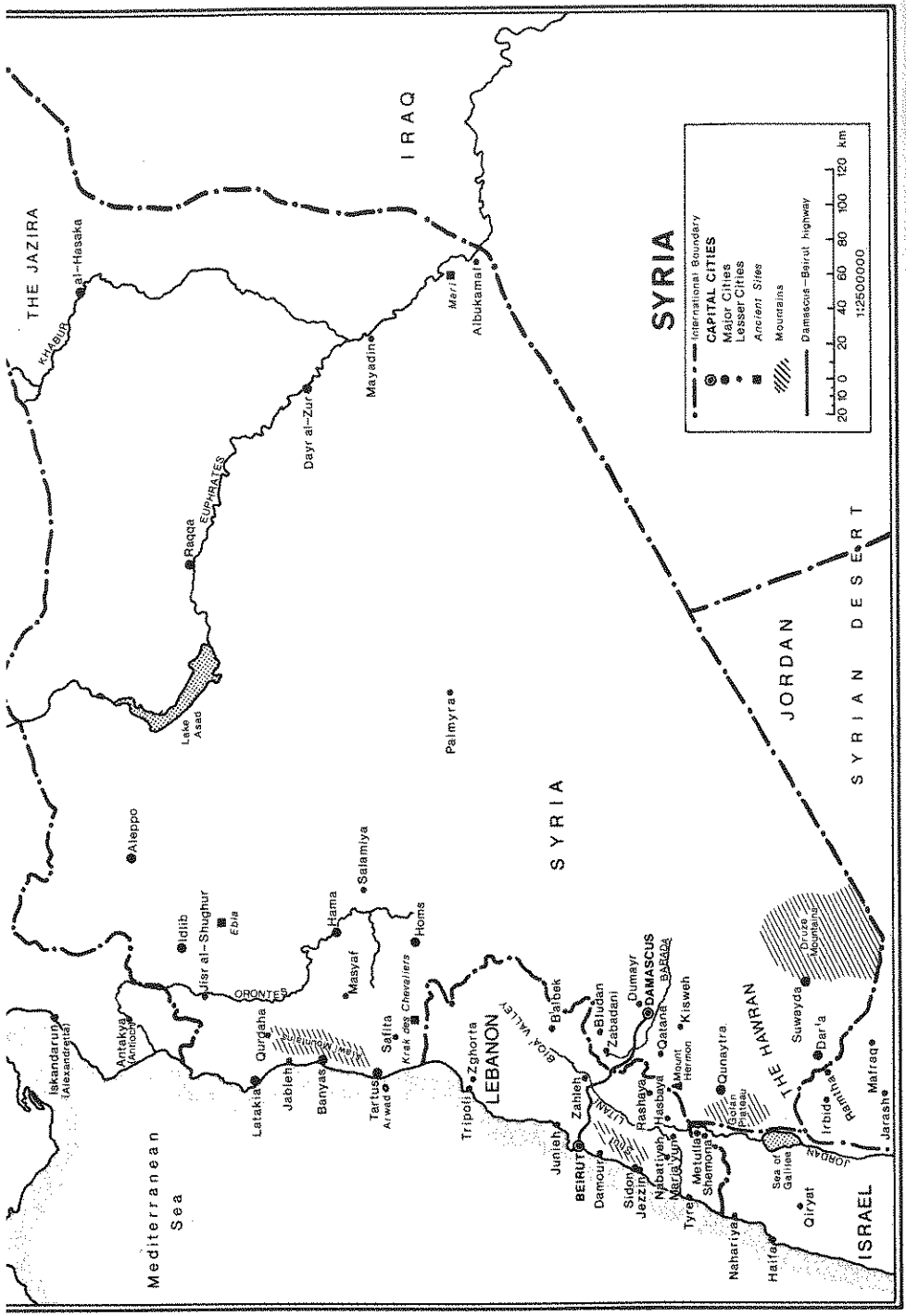

Preface

This book is an attempt to explain what the world looks like from the seat of power in Damascus. It is not an official biography of President Asad, but it could not have been written had he not agreed to talk to me, and for this direct access to him over several years I am grateful. I also valued the conversations I had with his two eldest children, Bushra and Basil.

My thanks are due to General Mustafa Tlas, the defence minister; Dr 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Kasm, the former premier; Mr Faruq al-Shara', the foreign minister; the late Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad and his successor as minister of information, Mr Muhammad Salman; and Dr Najah al-'Attar, the minister of culture.

First-hand information generously given by men and women who participated in events or were able to observe them at close hand was an important source for this work. Some of my informants are mentioned in footnotes, others are not. To all I am deeply grateful.

A number of Syrian officials assisted me, whether by arranging interviews or helping to locate documents in the archives, or making arrangements for me to travel about the country. I would particularly like to thank the staff at the presidential palace, especially Mr Jubran Kuriyeh, Mr As'ad Kamil Elyas and Mr 'Adnan Barniyeh, and Dr Saber Falhut, head of the Syrian Arab News Agency, and his colleague Mr Zuhayr Jannan.

Among the many Syrians who made me personally welcome I must thank Dr Sabah Kabbani, Mr 'Adnan 'Umran, Dr Badi' al-Kasm, Dr Osman al 'A'idi, Dr George Huraniyeh, Dr Ghassan Maleh, Dr Nabil Sukkar, Dr Rateb Shallah, Mr Ghalib Kayyali, Mr George Antaki, Mr Naji Shawi, Dr Nagib Mura, Mr Wajih Mustafa, Mr Antoine Touma and Dr Nicolas Chahine.

Mr Albert Hourani, the most inspiring of teachers, guided my studies in modern Arab history over many years. The Hon. David

Astor, when he was editing *The Observer*, encouraged me to travel widely in the Middle East and write about it. To both I owe affectionate thanks.

Dr Rana Kabbani, Mr Albert Hourani and Mr Eli Ered read the manuscript before publication, making many corrections. Mrs Anne Enayat gave editorial advice, Mrs Margaret Cornell edited the text and Miss Elspeth Hyams at I.B.Tauris saw it through the press.

Finally, I owe a large debt of gratitude to my colleague, Miss Maureen McConville who, over more than twenty years, unstintingly lent me her research and writing skills.

Patrick Seale
London, June 1988

PART TWO

The Leader

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Asad's State

Asad's rule in Syria began with an immediate and considerable advantage: the regime he displaced was so detested that any alternative came as a relief. As it was an open secret that he was more liberal than Salah Jadid, his victory ushered in a political honeymoon. People were longing to breathe more freely.

From the beginning Asad projected a different level of seriousness in state-building from anyone who had gone before. Undoubtedly he was influenced by the model of Nasser, the most prestigious Arab ruler of his generation whose regime he had observed at first hand, and from Egypt he borrowed a sense of the dignity and the panoply of government in contrast to the somewhat makeshift Syrian tradition of administration struggling to escape from bad Ottoman habits. Syrian Ba'thist rule as Asad developed it was a hybrid animal: from Jadid he inherited Soviet-style *étatisme* and a commitment to promote unfavoured classes. But anxious to throw off the unpopularity the radicals had earned, he dropped class warfare and set about broadening the base of his support by wooing the disaffected social classes with economic and political liberalization. His ambition was, above all, to establish his rule on a firm footing.

Asad was not an impulsive man. As he demonstrated in the months of manoeuvring preceding his capture of power, his habit was to weigh his moves carefully, to study the ground, to brood over possible consequences, before venturing forward. And as with his takeover, so now in his state-building he showed a surprising measure of forethought. The 1963 coup had been mounted with little or no anticipation of the problems of government, and Asad had in the subsequent years pondered the lessons of this unpreparedness. Now he came to power with detailed blueprints of how he intended to proceed.

His keynote in 1970 was the need for reconciliation and national unity after the divisive years, and in those early days he was on his feet

from morning till night receiving delegations from all over the country who came to offer their congratulations to the *Fariq*, the General who had delivered them from their tribulations. To dispel the old view of Syria's rulers as a harsh, anonymous and inward-looking caucus, he set off on tours of the provinces, showing himself to the people and bringing back to Damascus sackfuls of petitions and complaints which it took his hard-pressed staff weeks to sort through. Whole villages turned out to greet him, in contrast with the sullen indifference of the past when coups and counter-coups in the capital were often met with resignation. This time there was a real sense of a fresh start.

One of his more striking encounters was in Suwayda, capital of the Jabal al-Duruz, where he paid tribute to Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, the old nationalist warrior then in his late eighties who had led the revolt against the French in the 1920s. According to Druze tradition, Sultan Pasha was marked out for glory from his birth, as it occurred (in 1885) not just on a Friday but on the 27th day of Ramadan, the Night of Destiny – two portents of exceptional promise. An angel had appeared to his mother in a dream saying, 'Name your son Sultan and he will be a Sultan'. The Druze say that in seventy years of warfare, which began when the Turks hanged his father, Sultan Pasha was never wounded or captured, nor was his horse ever killed under him, clear evidence of divine protection.[1] But in spite of this glorious past Sultan Pasha had in the postwar years been on cool and sometimes hostile terms with Damascus. So when Asad came to honour this early nationalist and claimed continuity with his generation, he moved out from the narrow exclusiveness which had come to mark the Ba'th under Jadid. On Sultan Pasha's death in 1982 at the age of ninety-seven, about a million people attended his funeral. Asad came again to pay his respects and issued a personal message of mourning for the 'Commander in Chief of the Great Arab Revolution'.

Another overture in a somewhat different direction took the form of a directive to the board of the Writers' Union instructing it to rehabilitate members of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia who, when the Ba'th first came to power in 1963, had been generally ill-considered in the party's campaign to destroy the power of the old ruling class. Now Asad turned the page. The novelist Colette Khury, granddaughter of the Protestant statesman Faris Bey al-Khury, recalled that in a message to these forgiven writers, Asad declared, 'I am determined that you shall no longer feel strangers in your own country'.[2]

By 1971, an index of the more liberal climate was the staging of a play in Damascus by Sa'dallah Wannus, an 'Alawi playwright, debunking the official version of the Six Day War. Called 'An Entertainment for the Anniversary of 5 June', it attempted to tell the disagreeable truth about the war in a form which was nevertheless palatable. In the play government functionaries made windy victory speeches at an official commemoration of the war, but their rhetoric was interrupted by shouts of protest from the public on the lines of 'It wasn't like that!', 'It was my village the Israelis took', 'I remember what happened!' These interventions came from actors seated offstage and were part of the play, but this was not evident to some members of the audience who tried to join in and had to be restrained. The play was a great success.[3]

Ordinary people soon had reasons to be thankful for Asad's accession. The price of basic foods was cut by 15 per cent. The hated security services were purged and curbed, while responsibility for dealing with a number of crimes was transferred from the army to the police. Detention orders and many confiscations of property were revoked. Restrictions on travel and trade with Lebanon were lifted, restoring to Syrians their natural space. Assurances were given to the private sector, and exiles and emigrants were encouraged to bring home their money and their skills. When the Ba'th first seized power Asad had been in the forefront of the drive to break the city's hold over the countryside. But by 1970, and with ambitious economic and military plans in mind, he knew he needed allies in the urban middle class, so, breaking with his political past, he tried to win over the shopkeepers, businessmen and artisans of the towns as well as the many citizens who had fled Syria since 1963, mainly Sunnis from the former leading families.

Asad also set about courting the various layers of former Ba'thists who over the years had left the party or been pushed out. Relatively few of his party opponents were locked up in 1970 at the time of what he termed his 'Corrective Movement' – mainly Salah Jadid himself and his immediate supporters – while the less important were soon freed. Using the familiar tactics of carrot and stick, Asad urged the Jadidists to co-operate but warned them that there would be no second chance if they misbehaved. Short of party cadres, he also tried to lure back men of 'Aflaq's persuasion, differing in this from his former Military Committee colleagues who had had nothing but rancour for 'Aflaq's generation. 'Let us rebuild together', Asad appealed to the old members, 'and if we fail our heads will all be on the block together.' Some two thousand accepted his invitation. Among them were such party ideologues as Georges Saddiqni, who was to be Minister of Information during the October War, and Dr Shakir al-Fahham, a scholarly Ba'thist who had been secretary of the party's historic

founding congress in 1947 and had risen to become Rector of Damascus University. Now he was entrusted with, first, the Ministry of Higher Education, and then the Ministry of Education for the whole decade of the 1970s – positions to which Asad attributed great importance.

In these efforts of national and party reconciliation Asad displayed moderation and a skill for getting people of different characters and backgrounds to work together. It was noticed that he did not pass on bad opinions of men but kept them to himself. As a conciliator, he always strove to balance things out, whether discordant personalities or discordant ideas. In the Arab tradition of leadership, men in power tended to gather around them devoted followers, their *zilm*, and this was indeed how Asad had built up his own military power base. But now, in what seemed like a conscious departure from this somewhat primitive system, he set about trying to form state cadres and state institutions.

Restoring national unity

From the start of Asad's presidency two ideas about how to govern Syria were held in somewhat uneasy balance in his mind: the first was that he would allow no challenge to his rule, the second that wide popular backing for his policies was nevertheless necessary. He wanted to restore national unity but, his temperament being authoritarian rather than democratic, without taking undue risks. He seems to have had no ambition to create a pluralist society or to return to the chaotic democracy of 1955–8 which had brought Syria to the brink of disintegration. Rather he wished to mobilize Syrian energies for the battles ahead, seeking a national consensus cemented by his leadership. On the domestic front his key idea was that, unless Syria were itself united, there could be no hope of joint Arab action and therefore no hope of recovering the territories lost to Israel.[4]

When pictures of Asad appeared on the hoardings they were welcomed by the common people who had distrusted the faceless collegiality of the previous regime. Yet, for an 'Alawi to rule Syria, and to do so openly in defiance of the centuries-old tradition that power belonged in Sunni hands, demanded political courage. Salah Jadid had not been so bold. He had chosen the Sunni Atasi to front for him, in tacit admission that membership of a heterodox sect on the outer limits of Shi'ism was a political handicap. On overthrowing Jadid, Asad in turn seemed to hesitate on the threshold of the top job, contenting

himself at first with the title of prime minister and putting forward as head of state a little known Sunni schoolteacher of thirty-nine, Ahmad al-Khatib. But his early doubts were not in keeping with his character and convictions, as from boyhood he had tried to free himself from sectarian complexes. On 22 February 1971, he assumed 'presidential powers' and on 12 March a plebiscite confirmed him as president for a seven-year term. His intention from the start was to rule not just without a front man but without serious curbs of any sort; and in this too he broke with the model of Salah Jadid's 'collective' regime, which had abolished the title of 'president' and replaced it with that of 'head of state' stripped of any real power. Asad restored the presidential title and assumed it, thereby making clear that he would be boss in fact as well as name and that there would be nothing collective about his rule.

When Syria's new constitution was published on 31 January 1973, protests erupted, in Hama especially, because this document of 156 articles omitted to stipulate that the president of the republic should be a Muslim. It was a matter which exercised Syrian opinion because, since the 1930s, Syrian constitutions had laid down that the religion of the head of state had to be Islam. Soft-pedalling the Ba'th's traditional secularism in order to avoid confrontation, Asad instructed his newly formed People's Assembly to add the desired clause. But he seized the chance to give vent to his liberal view of Islam which, he said, should be 'far removed from the detestable face of fanaticism . . . Islam is a religion of love, of progress and social justice, of equality for all, a religion which protects both the small and the great, the weak and the strong, a religion in tune with the spirit of the age.'[5]

The question was then posed whether as an 'Alawi he could legitimately be called a Muslim. To resolve this dilemma, Asad appealed to an influential Shi'i cleric, the Imam Musa al-Sadr, head of the Higher Shi'i Council in Lebanon, who issued a *fatwa* or religious ruling that the 'Alawis were indeed a community of Shi'i Islam. A religious barrier to Asad's presidency was thus removed. When the still unsatisfied opposition then rioted to demand that Islam be declared the state religion (something which had not featured in the constitutions of 1930, 1953 or 1964), Asad stood firm and secured massive endorsement for his constitution in a referendum on 12 March 1973.

The institutional basis

While retaining the essentials of power in his own hands, Asad was anxious to give his state formal institutions, if of a somewhat

ceremonial nature. 'I have always been a man of institutions', he liked to say,[6] and in explaining what he meant he often evoked his early days as a student politician in Latakia when he rose to be chairman of his school's students' committee and then chairman of the nation-wide Union of Syrian Students. 'I did not impose myself on those committees. The students elected me, and I earned their respect because I worked within their institutions.' Whatever element of self-justification, even defensiveness, this recollection suggests, there was in Asad's mind an unbroken link between the student leader of the late 1940s and the state builder of the 1970s.

The bedrock institution of Asad's state was, of course, the party. As secretary-general of the Ba'th, his control over the party was unchallenged, but this did not mean that the party itself had no influence. In fact its power stemmed from Asad's respect for it: he understood that to weaken the party was to weaken his own rule. A stickler for the forms of legitimacy, one of his first acts on overthrowing Jadid had been to secure the appointment of a fourteen-man Provisional Regional Command. At the apex of power, the Regional Command, soon expanded to twenty-one members, became under Asad's chairmanship the principal forum where the country's internal and external policies were debated and decided – even if Asad invariably had the last word. It was the only group of men with whom throughout his presidency he was to meet regularly.

In 1970 one of the first acts of the Provisional Regional Command was to nominate 173 members of a People's Assembly drawn from a wide range of political tendencies,[7] which set about drafting a permanent constitution. (Two years later the Assembly was elected by universal suffrage.) By mid-April 1971, party elections were held throughout Syria to select delegates to a Fifth Regional Congress (8–14 May) and an Eleventh National Congress (23–31 August) – which in turn elected new Regional and National Commands.

Party congresses were to play an important role in Asad's state. Meeting every four years or so, these get-togethers assembled several hundred delegates representing the divisions, sections and branches of the party's vertical command structure throughout the country. Closed to the public, they were occasions for the presentation and lively discussion of reports and also gave a chance for rising Young Turks to challenge their elders in a robust atmosphere of 'party democracy'. The congresses laid down policy guidelines and established a sort of national pecking order by electing from among their number a Central Committee made up of party elites – provincial governors, party secretaries at governorate level, generals in the armed forces and

security agencies, ministers, members of the People's Assembly, leading academics, representatives of women's organizations – in fact Syria's top people.

All the balloting and debating revitalized the party but also consolidated Asad's hold over it. No longer 'Aflaq's opposition party of high-minded idealists, it became a ruling party, providing the backbone of the country's establishment, in fact a ladder of advancement for a new breed of careerists. Swollen with new recruits as well as seasoned cadres, the party took shape as an instrument of government, soon extending its tentacles to every corner of the country.

Having won back some old party members, Asad set about destroying any remaining support for Michel 'Aflaq or for the former head of state, Amin al-Hafiz, both of whom had found refuge in Baghdad after the Ba'th's recapture of power there in 1968. This he did by staging a treason trial in 1971 of the party founder and a hard core of about a hundred of his followers, most of them *in absentia*, on charges that they had conspired to overthrow the Syrian government in 1970 (before Asad's takeover) with financial and military help from Iraq. 'Aflaq, Hafiz and three others were sentenced to death and ninety-nine others to terms of imprisonment. Although Asad remitted the death sentences a few months later and released most of the defendants who had been caught in Syria, the trial was the clearest possible warning that he would brook no interference from Iraq and would tolerate no loyalty to 'Aflaq within the Syrian party.

At the same time as Asad revitalized the party congresses and Commands, he expanded and gave more authority to the party-controlled Popular Organizations created by Jadid's regime in order to mobilize support among the main social categories of the Ba'thist state – workers, peasants, students, women, youth and so forth. These grassroots mass movements were made into the building blocks of Asad's system, and the men who ran them were given considerable powers.[8]

Yet another development on which Asad set great store – and which had been a subject of dispute between him and Jadid – was the formation of a National Progressive Front in which political groupings other than the Ba'th could also make a showing. The Front was inaugurated on 7 March 1972 after several months of haggling over the terms of its charter and the respective powers of the members. Besides the Ba'th, which necessarily dominated the Front, its other members were the Communist Party, the Arab Socialist Union (a Nasserist relic of UAR days), the Arab Socialist Movement (the rump

of Akram al-Hawrani's party), and the Organization of Socialist Unionists (ex-Ba'thist Nasserists). But these four parties were not allowed to canvass for supporters in the army or the student body, which were reserved exclusively for the Ba'th. The Front was something more than theatre, however: it reflected the divided loyalties in the radical camp caused by the upheavals of earlier years. The base of Asad's regime was correspondingly broadened. Several leaders of the Front were given seats in the cabinet. (A paradoxical consequence of the Front's formation was to bring about a split in the Communist Party and the Nasserist ASU, to the Ba'th's advantage. So at the end of the day, rather than introducing a measure of plurality, the Front served only to confirm the Ba'th's dominance.)

Probably more effective than the People's Assembly or the National Progressive Front in giving the population a say was the system of local government which Asad put in place, like so much else, in the first year of his presidency. The process was started by elections to local councils in each of Syria's fourteen governorates on 3 March 1972. Candidates for seats on these councils were not limited to Ba'thists but included members of other parties in the Front as well as independents who came to represent the conservative opposition to the regime. By statute, 51 per cent of the council members had to be peasants or workers, and the balance merchants, members of the professions or intellectuals. At the March elections independents won a majority in both Damascus and Homs.

The councils' role was to assist the governor in the performance of his executive duties. In the main cities of Damascus and Aleppo, the council was about 100-strong, and from this number was chosen a ten-man executive board, who shared among themselves the different areas of administration such as education, housing, health, transport and so forth. Whereas in each of the governorates the councils assembled every three months, the executive boards met daily with the governors. At the local level these men had real power. Before this system of local government was introduced, Syria was extravagantly centralized: the smallest matter from the most distant province tended to land on the prime minister's desk. Asad strengthened central planning and made it more sophisticated, but to an extent he decentralized implementation. Councils were even given the power to raise some local taxes in order to finance projects outside the Five-Year Plans.

These new structures of local government were matched by a parallel party structure. In each governorate a Ba'th party secretary kept an eye on the governor, while members of the local party command supervised their opposite numbers on the governor's

executive board. In day-to-day affairs, therefore, the pa[illegible] watchdog overseeing the work of the elected representativ[illegible]

A traveller in the Syrian provinces would have discovered th[illegible] of importance in each provincial capital: first in terms of protocol the party secretary who, at the apex of the local party organization, was the instrument of the Regional Command and hence of Asad, its secretary-general; second came the governor who, like a French *préfet*, was the representative of the central government and hence of the president; and third was the head of political security, as often as not an 'Alawi colonel, whose role was to uncover and deal with any seditious activity and whose chain of command also led ultimately to Asad. For the system to work smoothly these three men had to get on together, but their relative importance differed from place to place. In a border region, for example, where security problems might loom large, the security chief would take precedence, but in the fast-growing Euphrates development area the governor's weight would be greater. Inevitably, the personalities of the men involved also determined the power balance between them.

Throughout Syrian society something like a two-tier system was installed: at the base was the security bedrock of the regime, an infrastructure of control in which 'Alawis were often but not exclusively to be found. Although Asad was not an 'Alawi sectarian, as the choice of his closest associates made clear – his prime minister, defence minister, foreign minister, private secretary, speech writer, personal bodyguard were all non-'Alawis – he still depended on his own community for security of tenure and ultimate survival. On this foundation a second tier was erected of administration, of economic activity, of semi-representative institutions, of public office and private gain which could afford to be more diverse and more open to all the talents.

The power base

In less than three years Asad summoned Syrians no fewer than five times to the ballot box: to confirm him as president, to elect representatives to the People's Assembly, to approve the constitution, to elect the governorate councils, and in foreign affairs to pronounce on Syria's proposed, but never realized, federation with Egypt and Libya. These ballots, each preceded by strenuous attempts to explain the issues and engage popular support, and the institutions which went with them, were a considerable improvement on the arbitrary and

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unstructured state of affairs which Asad had inherited. But there was an unresolved contradiction between the forms of participation which he so sedulously cultivated and the reality of his own ultimate control. To say he was an autocrat *malgré lui* is to do him more than justice because he had a powerful sense of knowing best. Yet he seemed also to have a hunger for democratic structures and gave a great deal of care to his new-born institutions. Perhaps what came to tilt the balance towards autocracy was the dangerous times he lived in and the nature of Arab politics, essentially brutal joustings between individual leaders each enjoying something like absolute power in his own country. On the specific matter of political repression things were plainly better under Asad, at the start at least, although even then the regime never gave up its prerogative to hit hard, unhampered by the courts, whenever it thought it necessary.

There was an enormous accumulation of power at the centre. Yet Asad's rule was not based on force alone, nor would it have survived had it been so. Most thinking Syrians accepted that he had come to heal the wounds in their society caused by the policies of his predecessors. The factor of public approval was not negligible. Arab regimes such as his, so often derided as oriental despotisms, in fact required a measure of popular consent, and the importance of public opinion could be gauged by the strenuous efforts made to mobilize it, by the repeated exercises in public self-justification, and by the strident media campaigns which rival Arab states waged against each other. Both the leaders and the led sensed that once popular consent was withdrawn, the substance went out of a regime.

In governing Syria Asad, at the start, consulted at enormous length; he listened, he went into detail, he turned problems inside out with laborious thoroughness, but in the end he alone decided. In spite of the new institutions his rule was personal. For all its innovations and improvements, the state Asad forged was imposed on society, not derived from it.[9]

What did his power rest on? In spite of the plebiscite and the popular welcome he had received it could not be said to rest on the will of the people: in no significant sense was he voted into office. His was a government which grew out of seven years of bloody struggle, and its foundations were and would remain the army, the security services and the party and government machines. But these largely closed worlds were not monolithic. Inside them ambitious men jockeyed for influence and intrigued against each other as in any political system, although all looked to the president to arbitrate between them. It was here, away from public view, that the cut and thrust of politics in Asad's Syria took place.

Asad did not wholly stifle political activity but confined it to in-groups such as the higher echelons of the party, the army commanders, and the security chiefs, all ultimately dependent on himself. Those outside these privileged circles soon learned they could go about their business without undue fear or constraint so long as they accepted that politics was not their domain. In such circumstances the only recourse of his opponents was silence or, in the case of last-ditch enemies like the Muslim Brothers, riot, revolt and assassination.

The team

In 1970 Asad began a long innings. His first day in office saw the final eclipse of the military officer and the emergence of the stubborn yet prudent ruler who, unwilling or unable to delegate, drove himself thereafter for fourteen hours a day. He was forty, married to a self-effacing wife, and surrounded by a young family of five, a daughter and four sons – of whom from now on he saw very little. There were to be no more family holidays, no weekends together, scarcely any family meals at which he presided. By nature Asad was a worker, and now, at the centre of his system and with dangers threatening from enemies on all sides, meticulous control of every detail became an obsession, unending desk-work became his fate. Interviewed many years later, his eldest son, Basil, could hardly remember an occasion in his youth when his father at home was not reading official papers.[10]

In his first year Asad put his team together, assembling the men who in many cases were to serve him for fifteen years and more. Just as he was consistent in his political principles, so he seemed extraordinarily reluctant to change the faces around him: it was in Asad's temperament to put a high price on loyalty. His personal staff at the presidency, even the clerks and coffee makers, remained unchanged year after year and repaid his trust with devotion. For the general public and for foreigners Asad might have seemed to lack charisma, but in those who worked closely with him he appeared to inspire deep affection and respect. Part of this was perhaps due to his man-management, his relaxed warmth with his staff and his personal knowledge of their situations. On one occasion the head of Syrian television inadvertently broadcast a programme about Faysal I (the Hashimite monarch who was briefly king of Syria in 1920) at a time when Asad was quarrelling with the Hashimite King Husayn of Jordan. Asad's secretary telephoned for an explanation of this political gaffe. The television chief had none: his father had suffered a stroke and he had been too busy to vet the programme before transmission.

Frostily he was told to go home and await sentence. But he had scarcely arrived there when he received another call from the secretary. There was no word of reproach. 'The president sends you his greetings. He wants to know where you wish your father to be sent for treatment.'[11]

The secretary in question was none other than Muhammad Dib Da'bul, universally known as Abu Salim, who, as the guardian of Asad's door and the keeper of his appointments book, was a central figure of the new regime. A Sunni from the small town of Dayr 'Atiya near Aleppo, Da'bul like his master seemed to spend most hours of the day and night at his desk, and even slept by the scrambler telephone in his office when Asad was abroad. In a system in which the president was all, the man who controlled access to him became himself very powerful, indeed a good deal more powerful than most ministers. One of Da'bul's functions was to sift the president's mail and forward important matters to Asad for his instructions. Asad would annotate letters in his own hand, often writing witty comments in the margin.

Asad's speech writer, interpreter and head of his press office was a Palestinian Christian, the mild and dedicated As'ad Kamil Elyas, who in the early years doubled as foreign policy adviser and general presidential factotum. Asad was a demanding taskmaster, insisting on a high standard of Arabic prose in all statements or letters issued under his signature, and himself making time to read classical Arabic. In the Arab world a care for the classical language was the mark of a true nationalist. One of Elyas's assistants in the presidential press department was Intisar Adhami, a young woman from a respectable Damascene Sunni family, who, like Elyas and Abu Salim, was still at her post nearly two decades later. Asad had found these three on the prime minister's staff when he first assumed the post in November 1970 and simply took them with him to the presidency where they remained. (It was not until the mid-1980s that Elyas, grown old in the job, gave up directing the press office to Jubran Kurriyeh, a member of the small Syrian Orthodox community.)

An even longer-serving but more ceremonial fixture was the *chef de protocole*, Khalil Sa'dawi, who had been at the palace in one job or another since the Second World War. On April Fools' Day 1979, Sa'dawi's mischievous colleagues presented him with a (forged) decree terminating his appointment. Tearfully Sa'dawi, a small grey-haired man with a ramrod back, protested that he would die rather than leave the president's service. Hearing of the prank Asad assured him that he could stay, which he did. Another faithful servant was the president's personal bodyguard, a Palestinian soldier, Colonel Khalid Husayn, who had taken care of Asad since the 1960s and was to win fame in June 1980 when he shielded him from the exploding grenade of a would-be assassin.

Equally unchanging were the important personalities of the regime. Asad's closest military ally in his struggles with Jadid was Mustafa Tlas, his friend from their days together as officer cadets. Tlas had become Chief of Staff in 1968, had helped Asad defeat Jadid and was rewarded by being appointed Defence Minister in March 1972, a post he still occupied in the late 1980s. (Tlas's promotion to a place in the military hierarchy second only to Asad's raised a small problem of rank. Asad was a *fariq*, a lieutenant-general, a rank he retained on becoming president and which none could thereafter surpass. So, to distinguish Tlas from the leader above him and from the major-generals (*liwa'*) below him, a special rank of *'imad* was created which he alone held for several years, until Hikmat al-Shihabi also acceded to it on becoming Chief of Staff, followed in 1984 by his deputy, 'Ali 'Aslan.)

It was natural that Asad should pay particular attention to the armed forces, the principal underpinning of his state. A country such as he aspired to run could not live under the threat of the putsches which had afflicted Syria for so long. Long before coming to power Asad had worked to strengthen the Ba'th apparatus within the armed forces so as to build what he termed an 'ideological army', politically educated and free from factionalism. Now he carried these trends further. The Ba'th's political monopoly in the army was confirmed and reinforced; all paramilitary forces such as the Palestinian Sa'iqa were brought firmly under army control; the army itself was expanded to the point where no single unit could hope on its own to carry out a coup; its officers were given monetary and other privileges. And Asad himself as commander-in-chief struck a balance between rival army commanders, a practice he extended to the competing security and intelligence services. He alone held all the strings.

In security matters Asad's most trusted henchman and a principal prop of his regime was the 'Alawi officer, Muhammad al-Khuly, head of Air Force Intelligence since 1963, who after 1970 built up what was in effect a presidential intelligence service answerable only to Asad. In a post so close to the centre of power Khuly came to be much hated and plotted against precisely because other men resented his unrivalled access to the president. (He was to hold this position until October 1987 when, in the wake of the Hindawi affair, he was shunted out of intelligence and into the administrative post of deputy commander of the air force.)

From the start Asad's principal preoccupation lay in foreign affairs – a presidential *domaine réservé* – and as his principal executant in this field he chose his friend from their militant schooldays, 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam. A Sunni from the coastal town of Banyas, Khaddam had worked as a lawyer and schoolmaster before entering government service as a provincial governor under the Ba'th in the 1960s, first in Hama, then in Qunaytra (where he was serving when the city was lost to Israel in the Six Day War) and finally in the District of Damascus. In the late 1960s he was promoted minister of economics and foreign trade and is thought to have been Asad's spy in Jadid's rival camp. Asad rewarded him with the foreign ministry where, with great displays of energy and combativeness, he was to grow over the years into the front man of Syrian diplomacy, offending many by his brusque and hectoring manner but recognized as an effective instrument of Asad's will.

Inside the civilian party apparatus Asad's chief aide was 'Abdullah al-'Ahmar, a Sunni from the village of Tal near Damascus, who like Khaddam was trained as a lawyer and owed his promotion to provincial governor, first at Idlib and later at Hama, to the 23 February 1966 coup. Following Asad's accession, 'Ahmar rose to become assistant secretary-general of the party's National Command, in effect Asad's chief party assistant, and the passing years saw him grow into an ever more influential Ba'thist bureaucrat.

Asad's first three prime ministers, all Sunnis from Damascus, did not stay in office as long as some of his other colleagues but they were there long enough to oversee the great restructuring of the Syrian economy associated with the third and fourth Five Year Plans, 1971–81. First came Major-General 'Abd al-Rahman Khulayfawi, an able army administrator, then Mahmud al-Ayyubi, who made his name as director-general of the Euphrates dam project, and then Muhammad 'Ali Halabi. He in turn was succeeded by the town planner and professor, Dr 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Kasm, who remained in office for over seven years, from 1980 to 1987. He was replaced as premier by the Speaker of the People's Assembly, Muhammad al-Zu'bi, who, to the scandal of Damascenes accustomed to the prime minister being chosen from among their number, was a country boy from the Hawran.

A feature of Asad's character was his dogged, somewhat obstinate consistency. He was not a man easily moved. Tactically he could show flexibility and catch his enemies by surprise, but on fundamentals he was almost wholly predictable. His key ideas, his methods of work, and his principal associates were very largely determined from the beginning of his rule and remained substantially unaltered thereafter.

There was, of course, some wear and tear of ideals as well as of persons, especially in moments of crisis, and some correction of aim, but continuity was to be his hallmark.

The end of 'Umran

Asad was quickly very firmly in the saddle, but there was one man who posed something of a threat so long as he was at large. Muhammad 'Umran, first leader of the Military Committee, started plotting against the new regime from Lebanon where he had lived since being released from Mezze during the Six Day War. (It will be recalled that 'Umran had broken with Jadid and Asad in 1965 to side with 'Aflaq and Hafiz, only to be routed with them in February 1966.)

In spite of the ups and downs in his fortunes and his present distance from the scene, 'Umran had not given up political ambition in Syria. He had retained links with old-guard Ba'thists like Salah al-Din Bitar and perhaps dreamed that Bitar might one day front for him as Amin al-Hafiz had done for the Military Committee. More to the point, 'Umran still had friends in the officer corps, friends who had helped Asad oust Jadid and, 'Umran believed, might now help him oust Asad. He believed they would rally to him if he showed his hand.

'Umran had set up house in the Lebanese port of Tripoli where the 'Alawi community was in frequent contact with 'Alawis across the border in Syria. Through such channels he thought he detected in early 1972 a current of opinion in his favour, and waited upon events. To help plan his return he set up a small 'brains trust' of which the most prominent members were Jubran Majdalani, a Lebanese lawyer and former member of 'Aflaq's National Command; Nabil Chuwayri, an early Ba'thist; and Raja Sidawi, an expatriate Syrian financier.

In a foolhardy gesture of defiance 'Umran then sent Asad a letter informing him of his intention to return home – in effect daring Asad to arrest him. He may have calculated that his army friends, who had tolerated his banishment, would not now stand for his imprisonment. But this was a misjudgement. 'Alawi officers in key commands were not ready to risk their gains in another round of musical chairs at the top.

'Umran's ambitions were soon brought to an abrupt end. On 4 March 1972, about a week before his planned return, he was murdered at his home in Tripoli by three assailants, one of them a woman, who were said to be Palestinians. Some sources claimed the assassins were sent by Nazih Zirayr of Homs Intelligence (later promoted head of

General Intelligence, *Mukhabarat al-'ama*), under the direct orders of General Naji Jamil, head of the party's bureau of state security, *Maktab al-amn al-qawmi*. Zirayr publicly denied the charge. Yet Jamil and 'Umran were known to be at daggers drawn, and Jamil, who had an air force background, was also Asad's personal friend. It was widely believed that Jamil, possibly encouraged by Rif'at al-Asad, planned the killing to promote Asad's interests but without consulting him. Other sources maintained that the intention was not to kill 'Umran but only to kidnap him, and that he was shot in a scuffle. In the event, 'Umran's family did not blame Asad for his death and 'Umran's son, Najih, called on Asad some six months later and wept in his arms. The exact circumstances of 'Umran's murder were never cleared up to the public's satisfaction, but after it most of his officer faction, with the exception of relatives and close friends, fell in behind Asad and were suitably rewarded.

Of the five comrades who had banded together in Cairo twelve years earlier he now stood alone.

13

Sadat, the Unsound Ally

From the moment of coming to power Asad was in the grip of an obsession. He was convinced that Israel had won the Six Day War by ruse, catching the Arabs napping, but that it was not inherently unbeatable. He longed to wipe away the stain of defeat which had affected him personally and profoundly, restore the confidence of his troops, recover the land, and show the world that, given a chance, the Arabs could acquit themselves honourably. The need to fight another round was his obsession. Without first redressing the balance with Israel, he saw no hope of a negotiated settlement. Israel was simply too well-placed to be inclined to disgorge the vast tracts of Arab territory it had seized, much of which in any event it hoped to retain on a permanent basis. In December 1970, very shortly after coming to power, Asad reaffirmed Syria's rejection of Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967 on the grounds that it meant the 'liquidation of the Palestine question'. War, not UN resolutions, was the only way to make Israel yield.

Asad differed from most Arab leaders in daring to contemplate an attack on Israel – an Arab 'first' he was to share with Sadat. Not in the least defeatist, he genuinely believed the Arabs could snatch back and hold some if not all their lost land. By changing the balance of power, another round would allow them to deal with Israel from something like equality, and no longer from weakness and humiliation.

This grim assessment that war was a necessity was peculiarly Syrian, stemming from the frustrations of twenty years of border tussles with Israel, from Syria's passionate attachment to the Palestine cause and, more generally, from the perception that Syria and Israel, face to face and competing for primacy in the Levant, were doomed to be antagonists. Any gain for the one must be a loss to the other. Syria could expect no favours from Israel and would grant none. No other Arab state sensed as acutely as Syria that the contest with Israel

involved nothing less than the Arabs' national existence. From 1970, and even earlier, Egypt and Jordan had in their different fashions attempted to find a *modus vivendi* with Israel, reaching out a hand to it and offering real concessions, but Syria wanted to put the clock back to before Israel's conquests in the Six Day War. In this Asad was merely reflecting what his public demanded. Hardly reconciled to Israel's existence within its prewar frontiers, Syrians were outraged by its wartime expansion and believed that what had been taken by force could only be regained by force.

Asad was an ardent nationalist who had come to power at the very moment when Nasser's death left the pan-Arab movement leaderless. The temptation to see himself as a possible successor must have been very great and undoubtedly he had a high opinion of himself. Still largely unknown and without Nasser's personal charisma, he could not realistically aspire to fill the gap left by the Egyptian leader, yet he seems to have felt that destiny had chosen him to rescue the Arabs from some of the consequences of Nasser's 1967 blunders – to which Syria, admittedly, and Asad himself had contributed: the Golan in particular weighed on his mind. So, with the stubborn patience which was the hallmark of his character, he set about preparing for war, not talking too freely or bragging about what he hoped to do but working quietly for the opportunity to hit back.

The search for allies

Even to consider waging war Asad needed first of all to break out of the regional and international isolation to which Syria had been condemned by the extremist policies of the Salah Jadid regime. Ten days after his seizure of power he flew to Egypt for a meeting with Nasser's successor, Anwar al-Sadat, at which he announced that Syria would join the proposed federation of Egypt, Libya and Sudan; and very quickly doors were flung open in other directions – towards Lebanon, towards Tunisia and Morocco with which relations were restored, towards Saudi Arabia then at odds with Syria because the pipeline carrying Saudi oil across Syrian territory to the Mediterranean had lain damaged since May 1970. It was now reopened and a Damascus-based radio station which had been preaching subversion in the Arabian peninsula was closed down.

But an overture to the Soviet Union was even more indispensable. In February 1971, ten weeks after his coup, Asad paid his first visit to Moscow as Syrian ruler, knowing full well that nowhere else in the world could he hope to obtain the weapons required for the enterprise he had in mind. By this time Syria had a fifteen-year-old military and economic relationship with the Soviet Union, so there was a solid base on which to build, and indeed as Defence Minister Asad had himself made several journeys to the Soviet bloc when, in the immediate aftermath of the Six Day War, he had struggled to rebuild his shattered army. He had visited Czech armaments factories and struck up an acquaintance with Marshal Grechko, the Soviet Defence Minister. But in 1970 the circumstances were delicate and the Kremlin more wary. It viewed Asad's seizure of power with a certain reserve, fearing it might presage a swerve towards the West which could undercut Soviet interests. It had not been particularly happy with the left-wing 'adventurism' of Jadid and the fiery doctors but, from Moscow's point of view, there had at least been no danger that that regime would fall into the Western orbit. A non-doctrinaire nationalist such as Asad could prove dangerously independent, however.

Asad moved fast to put relations with the Kremlin on a hard-headed basis. His former colleagues had expressed their sympathy for the Soviet Union in slogans, posturings and the mouthing of half-baked and ill-digested socialist ideology, expecting in exchange total Soviet support which to their disappointment they did not always get. Asad dropped the rhetoric but tightened the bond. His earlier dealings with Moscow and his own sceptical and pragmatic nature had taught him that solid relations could be built only on mutual interests. The Russians were not in the habit of making gifts: he could not expect something for nothing. In particular, he grasped early on that the Soviet Union's friendship for the Arabs would never match the United States' generous, sentimental and open-handed commitment to Israel: whatever he secured from Moscow would have to be paid for, and if he could not raise the cash, payment would have to be in some other coin.

The essence of his policy towards the Soviet Union, for which he had argued in the leadership before 1970 and which he now put into practice, was that arms in sufficient volume and of the right quality could be acquired only within the context of Soviet regional interests. What did the Russians want? Asad knew their Middle East priorities well: a stable presence and listening post in the heart of the Middle East, access to friendly air and naval facilities, a lever on the peace process, and above all the curtailment of American influence. Soviet interests had to be understood and addressed. Only by showing the Russians trust and by giving them something of value could their confidence be won and the flow of arms assured. In practical terms this

meant that Asad agreed to a measure of co-ordination with Moscow, although at this stage and for another decade he resisted formalizing the tie in a Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation as Moscow would have liked.

It was far from being a cloudless relationship and it was to take Asad several years, in fact the best part of the 1970s, to get the Soviets to recognize him as their indispensable regional partner. As Syrian officials privately conceded, Soviet attitudes were often patronizing or even downright scornful of the Arabs' will to fight, and Arab disunity was routinely cited as a pretext for withholding supplies. Another source of tension was Asad's candid and forceful insistence that he would tolerate no meddling in his internal affairs by the Soviet embassy in Damascus, and that relations had to be based on strict mutual non-interference. In the end Asad's tactics got him much of what he wanted and once they had taken his measure, the Russians were at some pains to keep him happy.

The obverse of his efforts to woo the Soviet Union in the interests of his war strategy was a neglect of the West, especially of the United States: for nearly seven years, from 1967 to 1974, Syria had no relations with Washington. Other Arab states – Egypt, Algeria, Sudan and Iraq among them – had also broken with Washington at the time of the Six Day War but there had been a drift back, if not to diplomatic relations then at least to something like business as usual often under the cover of consular or commercial sections. Syria remained adamantly closed to the United States, and not only because of Asad's Moscow diplomacy. There were personal factors as well. Like many Syrians he viewed the United States with mistrust, even with animosity. No one in his entourage understood how the Arab case might be put to the West, nor how Western public opinion and governments might be won over. As the United States was equally ignorant of and hostile to Syria, the gulf between the two countries was very deep, which was to prove a grave disability for Syria in the political bargaining which followed the October War.

But in 1971 it did not seem to matter. Asad's overriding concern was armaments, not diplomatic manoeuvring. Appreciating his business-like approach, the Soviets indicated that they were ready for a long-term relationship and started treating him with a certain regard. Between February 1971 and October 1973 he was accorded the privilege of several meetings with General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev on the half dozen visits he paid to the Soviet Union, some of them unreported. On the longer stays the Russians took him on tour to Leningrad and Kiev, Georgia and Armenia, Uzbekistan and Azerbayjan.

In Moscow he was always given apartments in the Kremlin itself where the hospitality was gargantuan. The poor boy from the 'Alawi mountains could not but be impressed by the magnificence of the place, the immense dining halls and reception rooms, the golden domes and cut-glass chandeliers – and by the power of a state that could afford such luxury for its rulers.

Dealings with Egypt

If the Soviet Union was Syria's only possible armourer, Egypt was the obvious ally. Asad's earlier dealings with Egypt – his exile in Cairo as a young man and the bloody struggle with Nasser's Syrian supporters in the early months of Ba'th rule – had left a sour taste, but unpleasant personal memories were of little account when weighed against the geopolitical necessity of a Syrian-Egyptian alliance. Asad's Ba'thist upbringing had taught him that the success of the Arab cause depended on a Syrian tie with Egypt. Damascus and Cairo were the two pivots of Arab history: when they were at one the Arabs triumphed, and when they were apart the Arabs became weak and vulnerable. If Syria had not seceded from the United Arab Republic in 1961, the catastrophe of 1967 when Israel played on Syrian-Egyptian differences would not have happened. Of all the Arabs, the Syrian Ba'thists had been the first to cheer when Nasser proclaimed 'Arabism' to be Egypt's official policy in 1955, and then the first to weep when the Syrian-Egyptian union ran into trouble. Asad understood the premises of Nasser's Arab policy which gave Syria a central role: Nasser had been able to dominate the region and confront Israel and the great powers once he had brought Syria under his control and, conversely, he was thrown on the defensive once Syria broke free. Clearly Syria and Egypt stood and fell together. It was such thoughts which carried Asad to Cairo within days of his coup.

In military terms he knew that a two-front strategy against Israel was the essential prerequisite for victory. In 1967 Egypt, Jordan and Syria, suspicious of each other and at odds, had fought separate, uncoordinated wars, allowing Israel to defeat each of them in turn. Next time Asad was determined that Israel would be forced to fight on two fronts simultaneously, an analysis Soviet defence planners endorsed.

Asad could not consider King Husayn a fighting partner, as Syria and Jordan had been on poor terms for years. The débâcle of the Six Day War, when Jordan accused Syria of failing to defend the West Bank, had envenomed relations further, as did Husayn's subsequent

secret meetings with Israeli leaders. The Black September crisis of 1970 which had brought Jordan and Israel together had driven Jordan and Syria still further apart. Asad knew well that Husayn could not contemplate hostile action against Israel, nor would he welcome such action by others for fear that war would shake the tightrope between the Arabs and Israel on which he was precariously balanced. In the 1972–3 run-up to the October War Asad saw Husayn more as an enemy than an ally.

So Egypt was Syria's only choice as war partner: a two-front strategy with Egypt was in fact the bedrock of the secret planning which Asad and Anwar al-Sadat began early in 1971. Asad had full confidence in his Egyptian ally. Although Sadat had yet to establish himself on the world stage, and had been overshadowed by Nasser for much of his life, to the Syrians he was already a familiar figure as one of Nasser's principal lieutenants with a nationalist aura all his own. It was well known that as a young man during the Second World War he had trafficked with German spies and spent time in jail for plotting to kill pro-British collaborators, and he had been the one to announce to the world the Free Officers' revolution of 1952, emerging in 1970 as Nasser's chosen successor. He had experience, style, political sophistication and, aged fifty-three in 1971, a certain mature, pipe-smoking calm.

At this stage Asad was more inclined to stress his affinities with Sadat than any difference between them. Their careers seemed to march in step: Sadat was confirmed as president of Egypt on 15 October 1970, just a month before Asad seized power, and, in turn, Asad's presidential plebiscite on 12 March 1971 took place only a few weeks before Sadat in early May locked up his principal left-wing challengers in 'Ali Sabri's so-called 'power centre' and made himself uncontested master of Egypt. Asad's confidence was not just in Sadat but in Egypt itself, which with its size and strength was evidently the senior partner in the relationship. The War of Attrition which Egypt had waged against Israel from March 1969 to July 1970 had shown how far Nasser had managed to rebuild the Egyptian army in both armaments and morale. Moreover, opinion in Egypt seemed as anxious as in Syria to join battle with Israel and force it to return the territory it had seized.

At the start Asad's alliance with Sadat was forged under the cover of the proposed Federation of Arab Republics embracing Egypt, Syria, Libya and Sudan. As well as providing a bonanza for constitutional lawyers, this ambitious plan announced in April 1971 led to much to-ing and fro-ing between the member states. Although Sudan soon

dropped out and the project withered within two years to an empty husk, the frequent federal summits provided Asad and Sadat with occasions for secret meetings. By the end of 1971 the two leaders had taken soundings in Moscow, had appointed Egypt's war minister, General Muhammad Sadiq, supreme commander of both armies, and had reached agreement on broad strategy. They also decided to exclude the intemperate Colonel Qadhafi from their counsels. What they knew they needed above all was huge quantities of armaments, and it was to filling their arsenals and training their troops that they devoted much of 1972 and 1973. The pattern of those years was of ever closer Syrian-Egyptian co-operation. Asad and Sadat made further visits to each other's capitals and to Moscow as did their defence ministers and teams of senior officers. So frequent were these contacts that with hindsight it seems astonishing that the alarm was not sounded. Instead, the outside world ridiculed Sadat for repeatedly promising a 'year of decision' in his conflict with Israel – a contest which he was regularly obliged to defer. 'It was a good thing no one believed him', Asad later remarked.[1]

One reason the signals were not read correctly was that the world was watching Sadat rather than Asad, and Sadat was sending out contradictory messages which left observers more bemused than alarmed. The Israelis for their part concluded that he was an Egyptian leader with no pan-Arab ambitions, who had turned his back on war – in fact that he was the very antithesis of Nasser. What was not widely realized was that Sadat had come to think that the Arab-Israeli stalemate, as well as the Russians themselves, whose scepticism about his warlike intentions exasperated him, needed a salutary jolt. His predilection for shock tactics – the belief that political change could be brought about by individual actions of a startling nature – was perhaps a late outgrowth of his youthful terrorism.[2] So he quarrelled spectacularly with Moscow, while flirting discreetly with Washington.

The row between Cairo and Moscow dominated 1972, reaching a climax in July with Sadat's abrupt expulsion of Russian personnel from Egypt – a total of 7,752 advisers, weapons experts, field troops and dependants.[3] He justified his *coup de théâtre* on the grounds that the Soviet authorities were not only being impossibly slow in making promised arms deliveries but were sacrificing Arab interests on the altar of détente with the United States. He professed to believe that Moscow wanted to prevent Egypt from fighting and that he needed to call its bluff.[4] But it later emerged that Sadat's anti-Soviet move was more connected with the feelers he was then putting out to Washington.

As it happened, Asad was in Moscow on 8 July 1972 when Sadat told Ambassador Vladimir Vinogradov that the Soviet experts in Egypt had to go. Asad was having his own small tiff with the Soviet leaders at the time, as he was coming under more than usual pressure to sign a Treaty of Friendship and was adamantly refusing to do so. 'Friendship needs no treaty', he liked to say.[5] The deadlock was such in his Kremlin talks that he ordered his delegation to pack their bags, whereupon Brezhnev called on him in his suite to propose that the talks should resume without further mention of a treaty. It was at this juncture, on the last day of Asad's visit, that news of Sadat's bombshell reached Moscow. Brezhnev made his way to Asad's Kremlin suite for a second time: 'I know you will tell me', he said ruefully, 'that our treaty with Egypt has not saved us from embarrassment there. But we would like you to help us with Egypt if you can.' Asad agreed to fly directly from Moscow to Cairo to try and patch things up. He was as startled and perturbed as the Russians themselves by Sadat's impulsive gesture so alien to his own temperament. Like Sadat he wanted Soviet arms transfers to be larger and faster, but he was aghast at Sadat's recklessness in endangering a relationship with Moscow which was so vital to the Syrian-Egyptian war effort. When Sadat urged him to expel his own Soviet advisers (then between 2,500 and 3,000) he refused, declaring publicly that 'they are here for our own good'.[6] Pursuing his mediation efforts, he went to see Brezhnev again in September, and in October persuaded Sadat to send Prime Minister 'Aziz Sidqi to Moscow to repair the damage. In the autumn of 1972 the flow of Soviet arms and experts to Cairo was resumed.

Sadat threw out the Russians although he had signed a Treaty of Friendship with them a year earlier, whereas Asad kept the experts while declining a treaty. Sadat grumbled a great deal that the Soviet Union was trying to dictate issues of war and peace in the Middle East, whereas Asad made a point of asserting that no outside power could prevent him fighting if he chose to do so: 'As far as we in Syria are concerned, a decision on war cannot be made in Moscow'.[7]

Perhaps Asad should have been alerted by these early signs of Sadat's waywardness. But Sadat could claim, and Asad had to concede, that shock tactics had worked: after the 1972 quarrel, Soviet aid to both Egypt and Syria rose to unprecedented levels. The whole episode was not to the cautious Asad's liking but in the end he was reassured and went forward with his partner beyond the point of no return.

On 23 April 1973 he flew secretly to Cairo and from there Husni Mubarak, then Egypt's air force commander, escorted Sadat and Asad to the presidential rest-house at Burj al-'Arab, west of Alexandria, for

two days of detailed discussions in which they agreed the main lines of their campaign.[8] The pace then quickened. In early May Asad was off again to Moscow in search of more aircraft and air defences. Given Israel's air superiority, he needed a dense net of low- and high-level anti-aircraft systems – AA guns and SAMs with their supporting electronics. He returned home accompanied by no less a person than the Soviet air force commander, Marshal P.S. Kotakhov – a clear sign of Soviet commitment to his war. With Soviet help Syria built up a force of 300 combat aircraft, more than a hundred SAM batteries with between 400 and 500 launchers, and at least 400 anti-aircraft guns.[9]

But in spite of – or perhaps because of – their differences with Sadat, the Russians were still giving Egypt priority, with Syria trailing several months behind in acquiring the latest equipment. In 1970 Egypt had been the first to receive ZSU-23 radar-guided anti-aircraft guns and the first to be shown the advanced MiG-21 MF only then being introduced into the Soviet air force, for which Syria had to wait until 1972–3. In 1972 Egypt was again ahead in getting the mobile SAM-6 and the T-62 battle tank, the Soviet Union's latest at the time.

Did the Soviet authorities know that the October War was coming? Obviously, yes. Did they help in its planning? The answer must also be yes, to the extent that Arab arms requirements were worked out with Soviet experts on the basis of specific military plans.[10] But they were not told officially that Syria and Egypt would attack until 4 October, two days before the outbreak of war. Did they then approve? They must clearly have had doubts. The Soviet Union's dilemma was that, to retain influence with both Syria and Egypt, it had to supply them with weapons for the recovery of their territory lost in 1967 – their most urgent national priority. But the Soviet Union was also anxious to dispel the threat of war because it feared a regional confrontation with the United States. In seeking a way out of this dilemma it tried to persuade Washington to impose a political settlement on Israel. For example, when Brezhnev and his Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko, met Nixon and Kissinger at San Clemente, California, on 23 June 1973, Brezhnev proposed that Israel withdraw to its pre-1967 borders in return for an end to the state of belligerency, with final peace to follow after negotiations with the Palestinians.[11] Kissinger did not hesitate to reject terms which he considered pro-Arab as well as likely to consolidate Soviet influence. A chance to avert war was missed.

The next decisive step in the run-up to the October War was a top secret meeting of the Syrian-Egyptian Armed Forces Supreme Council from 21 to 23 August 1973. Wearing casual clothes as if going on holiday, Syria's six most senior officers – Defence Minister Mustafa

Tlas, Chief of Staff Yusuf Shakkur, Air Force and Air Defence Commander Naji Jamil, Chief of Operations 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Dardari, Military Intelligence chief Hikmat al-Shihabi, and Navy Commander Fadl Husayn – boarded a Soviet passenger liner at Latakia on its regular run to Alexandria, where they held two days of discussions with their Egyptian opposite numbers at Naval Headquarters at Ras al-Tin. This was the final review of war plans by the men who would conduct the battle. Close attention was given to an elaborate deception intended to fool Israel and the United States into believing that the massing of men and equipment on the Syrian and Egyptian fronts was no more than routine autumn manoeuvres.

The two chiefs of staff, the Syrian Yusuf Shakkur and the Egyptian Sa'd al-Shazly, then signed a formal document enshrining their joint intent to go to war and recommending a choice of possible dates to their political masters. The battle could start on a date between 7 and 11 September or between 5 and 10 October at a time when Suez Canal tides and hours of moonlight were favourable. A two-week countdown was requested, whichever D-Day was chosen.[12]

From Alexandria Mustafa Tlas flew to Syria under a false name to brief Asad and Sadat, who were holding a summit meeting of their own on 26–27 August in the mountain resort of Zabadani, west of Damascus, where they had gone to avoid the summer heat. It was then that the decision to fight in October was taken. Asad recalled later that Sadat, who faced student trouble at home, was anxious to go to war before the autumn term brought mutineers thronging back to the campuses. Asad saw the point but felt that their great venture could not be made to depend on an academic timetable.[13]

D-Day was finally decided upon at a secret meeting of Asad and Sadat in Cairo on 12 September (held in the wings of a tripartite summit with King Husayn of Jordan). On 22 September the fifteen-day countdown began and at Asad's house in Damascus on 3 October, he and Egypt's war minister, General Isma'il, agreed on H-Hour. The Syrians wanted to attack at dawn with the sun behind them; the Egyptians preferred dusk to allow for a night crossing of the Canal free from Israeli air attack. The compromise reached was that the attack would be launched on both fronts at 14.00 hours on 6 October.

Divergence of aims

Although Asad did not know it, his enterprise with Sadat was flawed from the start, because behind the impressive facade of co-operation

there was no unity of mind, and on this hidden reef the Arabs' great hopes were to founder. The points of divergence could scarcely have been more fundamental: the two leaders were not at one on the reasons for fighting. Asad went to war because he believed there could be no satisfactory negotiation with Israel until the Arabs had snatched back some at least of their lost land. Peace-making, he believed, could be a product of war, but not a substitute for it. Sadat went to war because the peace diplomacy he was already conducting, covertly as well as overtly, had faltered. He thought a shock would revive it.

As early as December 1970, very shortly after succeeding Nasser, Sadat sent private word to Washington that he was interested in peace. On 4 February 1971 he offered to reopen the Suez Canal, blocked since 1967, in exchange for a partial Israeli withdrawal linked to a timetable for a comprehensive settlement. On 15 February he assured the UN negotiator, Gunnar Jarring, that Egypt was ready for peace with Israel if it withdrew from Sinai. Israel refused. In early March he appealed in vain to Nixon to support his 4 February proposal. Then, when he signed his friendship treaty with the Soviet Union on 27 May, he hastened to inform Washington that this did not diminish his interest in a peace settlement.

When in late 1971 Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Adviser, displaced Secretary of State William Rogers as America's key foreign policy-maker, Sadat was quick to open a 'back channel' to him to communicate the same peace message. In response Kissinger made it amply clear, directly and through go-betweens such as King Faysal's brother-in-law, the Saudi intelligence chief Kamal Adham, that he would not act on the peace process so long as Soviet influence in Egypt remained strong.[14] So to meet what he took to be Kissinger's conditions, Sadat expelled the Russian experts in July 1972. But even this dramatic move failed to draw Washington and its Israeli ally into talks. Although understandably upset, Sadat still did not give up, sending his national security adviser, Hafiz Isma'il, to repeat to Kissinger in two days of secret discussions in Connecticut on 24–25 February 1973, and yet again at another unpublicized meeting outside Paris on 20 May, that if Israel undertook to withdraw from the occupied territories, normalization and peace were on offer.[15] No one could say he did not try. Indeed, these were only the high points of a continuous, but increasingly despairing, Egyptian endeavour to get peace talks with Israel started between 1971 and 1973 and thereby preclude the need to go to war. These efforts came to nothing largely because it was Kissinger's deliberate policy to stall and prolong the Arab-Israeli stalemate.[16]

Husayn of Jordan was as eager as Sadat for peace talks. Fearful of war, he watched Syrian and Egyptian preparations with mounting anxiety. The 1967 war had cost him half his kingdom, another conflict could cost him the throne itself. In an attempt to pre-empt this danger, he went twice to Washington in February 1973 to try to enlist Nixon's and Kissinger's backing for the proposals which he had already and repeatedly put to Israeli leaders face to face:[17] if Israel gave up the idea of annexation, he would make peace; he would agree to border changes as well as to Israeli military outposts, even settlements, along the Jordan river. But Kissinger would waste no time on proposals which Israel had already rejected. In May 1973 Husayn warned Washington that the Syrian and Egyptian build-up was too realistic to be considered simply manoeuvres,[18] and on receipt of this warning Kissinger called for a high-level review of the possible threat. Israel's Defence Minister, Dayan, went so far as to order a partial mobilization, but the alarm proved false, or at least premature.

Israel and the United States were convinced that the Arabs would not dare start a war they had no hope of winning. The view was that Israel's superiority, especially in the air, robbed the Arabs of any rational military option. Indeed, so lamentable had been earlier attempts at Arab co-operation that the notion that Egypt and Syria, historically at odds, could effectively combine was utterly discounted. In both Israel and the United States complacency bred of the 1967 walkover remained unshaken and was if anything reinforced by Sadat's expulsion of the Russians and by the vast strength Israel had acquired with American help.

Kissinger's overweening confidence in his own powers of persuasion also led him to dismiss Husayn's warning. He had let it be known that he would be ready to begin preliminary talks on the Middle East problem following the Israeli elections of 30 October, and he felt sure that the prospect of a possible diplomatic settlement would be enough to keep the Arabs quiet until then. It need hardly be added that Kissinger had no sympathy for the Arabs' acute sense of frustration over Israel's continued occupation of their territory and over the ever more explicitly annexationist tone of Israeli leaders. In fact, he deliberately sharpened the Arabs' frustrations in the belief that this would make them more pliant. Sadat's vacillations from peace plea to war threat were laughed at, while the unknown Asad was ignored.

Asad had taken note of Sadat's public peace proposals, such as the offer of a conditional reopening of the Suez Canal of February 1971, but read their failure as reassuring proof that Sadat shared his view that nothing of substance could be regained from Israel without a war.

But he knew nothing of Sadat's 'back channel' to Kissinger, failed to grasp how strenuously his Egyptian ally and his Jordanian neighbour sought talks, and did not realize the extent to which Sadat saw war as no more than a shock to awaken the dormant peace process.

Thus while Asad planned to regain territory, Sadat hoped merely to unblock a process of diplomacy. Asad's was a war of liberation, Sadat's an essentially political war. Of course, there was a certain overlap in their positions. Asad did not imagine that a war, however much territory was regained in the course of it, could of itself settle the complex Arab-Israeli conflict: political negotiations would have to follow. But the weight given by each to the political and military aspects of the campaign was very different.

Sadat told his generals that he wanted to wage a 'limited war' – repeatedly making the point, as recorded by Mohamed Heikal, that if he could win back only ten millimetres of ground on the Canal's east bank, this would immeasurably strengthen his negotiating hand.[19] Asad in contrast envisaged the Syrian army retaking the Golan, the Egyptian army retaking Sinai, and Israel being forced under pressure to give up in subsequent negotiations the rest of its 1967 conquests – the Palestinian territory on the West Bank of the Jordan and in the Gaza Strip. This was Asad's understanding of his agreement with Sadat. As he insisted later:[20]

> The goal was the retrieval of territory which Israel occupied in 1967. Each country was free to plan its offensive on its own front, but it was agreed that Syria's aim was the recovery of the Golan while the Egyptian objective was to reach the Sinai passes in the first stage before regrouping for the reconquest of the whole peninsula. This was what Sadat and I decided and it was on this principle that we went to war.

Why did the crucial difference in war aims not become plain at the many prewar meetings? The explanation is that Sadat lied to Asad, deliberately deceiving him about his intentions and leading him to believe that the offensive Egypt would launch would be wider in scope than was ever intended. The deception was not a mere verbal misunderstanding: the Syrians were actually fed false war plans.

Egypt's Chief of Staff, General Sa'd al-Shazly, was from the start convinced that Egypt could mount only a limited attack across the Suez Canal to capture and hold a narrow strip of land on the eastern bank. He judged that a larger offensive to drive Israel beyond the Sinai passes, let alone out of Sinai and the Gaza Strip altogether, was wholly

beyond Egypt's powers: its air force was too weak and its SAM air defences too few and too static to support any substantial advance east of the Canal. To move into Sinai beyond the SAM umbrella would in his view be suicidal folly, as the Egyptian ground forces would then be annihilated by the Israeli air force as they had been in 1967. Accordingly he prepared a plan, code-named High Minarets, for the limited cross-Canal attack which he believed was the only one feasible.

But such a restricted objective was unavowable. National honour demanded a military plan to liberate the whole territory seized by Israel. Securing arms in quantity from the Russians, always the subject of hard bargaining, also required setting one's objectives high. When Sadat and his war minister of the time, General Sadiq, went to Moscow to plead for arms in October 1971, the plan on which they based their requests was not the modest High Minarets but the more ambitious 'Operation 41' which envisaged seizing the key Giddi and Mitla passes some forty to fifty kilometres east of the Canal. An element of double-dealing was therefore built into Egyptian war planning from 1971 onwards: while the Chief of Staff and a handful of planners worked secretly on High Minarets, Egypt's Soviet advisers and the Syrians were led to believe that the objectives set out in Operation 41, renamed Granite Two, were the real ones. But as Shazly was later to explain, 'Granite Two remained a paper plan, impossible with the means at hand'.[21]

Deceiving the Soviet authorities was one thing and might possibly have been justified to get the weapons flowing. In any event the Egyptians believed it was only prudent to be less than candid with Moscow as they were never sure how much information it might share with Washington in the context of détente. An element of misrepresentation could even be passed off as part of a necessary deception plan.[22] But it was quite another thing for Sadat to deceive his Syrian ally, and so expose him to dangers far greater than those he had anticipated.

The fraud began at the Sadat-Asad summit at Burj al-'Arab in April 1973 when the two leaders agreed on the overall shape of the campaign. Sadat knew that Asad would not fight alongside him unless the joint aim was the liberation of both Sinai and Golan, to be pursued by putting maximum simultaneous pressure on Israel on both fronts. So he sold him Granite Two. At this meeting Asad was unhappy about deficiencies he detected in Egypt's preparations for so big an operation and, overcoming Sadat's reluctance, he insisted on questioning Egypt's new war minister, General Ahmad Isma'il, who was summoned from Cairo for the purpose. As a result of this interview the war was put back from the spring to the autumn of 1973 to allow time for more equipment to be acquired.[23]

General Shazly reveals in his memoirs how Asad was hoodwinked. On Sadat's instructions, Isma'il ordered Shazly to revive Granite Two shortly before Asad was due at Burj al-'Arab, and when Shazly protested that the plan was no more militarily feasible in 1973 than it had been in 1971, Isma'il confessed that it was a political manoeuvre to keep the Syrians in line. The Egyptians had no real qualms about deceiving the Syrians because of their deep dislike of them: Egypt still bore the wounds of the Syrian secession and there was a widely shared feeling that the fractious, thankless Syrians had bitten the hand that fed them. So great was the distaste for Syria that Shazly even argued, in the privacy of the Egyptian General Staff, that Egypt would be better off fighting the war alone. But Sadat wanted his Syrian ally on board. Isma'il's solution to the problem of satisfying Asad was simple: work on the two plans – the limited High Minarets and the more ambitious Granite Two – would proceed together but whereas the first was the real one, the second which provided for the seizure of the Sinai passes would be presented to Asad, but 'would never be implemented except under the most favourable conditions'. 'I was sickened by the duplicity', Shazly wrote.[24]

Sadat's bad faith was by no means Asad's only problem. His precious war plans were betrayed to the enemy but, such was Israeli and American complacency, with no effect on the course of the battle. In late August or early September 1973 an Arab intelligence service received a coded message from a Syrian agent – a major-general in the Syrian army who had been recruited by this service two years earlier – requesting an immediate meeting. The Syrian brought with him a complete set of plans for the October War as drawn up by the Egyptian and Syrian high commands, copies of which were promptly conveyed by trusted emissaries to just two recipients: Henry Kissinger and Moshe Dayan.

But the documents were simply not taken seriously. Dayan and Kissinger were certain this was an Arab exercise in disinformation, designed to cause Israel the expense and disruption of yet another pointless mobilization and to induce the United States to press Israel to be more flexible in its response to the peace proposals Egypt and Jordan had advanced. When war came on 6 October the plans forwarded to Dayan and Kissinger were found to be exact in every particular, except for an eight-hour discrepancy over H-Hour which

was given as 6 a.m. The plans had evidently not yet been amended by the compromise, reached by Asad and General Isma'il on 3 October, which fixed H-Hour at 2.05 in the afternoon.

Kissinger never revealed, and would doubtless categorically deny, that he had any precise foreknowledge of the October War. Dayan was privately more candid. When the war was over he made contact with the Arab spymaster whose astonishing intelligence scoop had gone unheeded. His message said in effect:[25]

> I am aware that you have me at your mercy. If you reveal what you know, my career will be over. In the meantime please be kind enough to receive with our deepest gratitude the highest military decoration Israel can award to a foreign national.

Perhaps it was just as well that Asad had no inkling of how shaky his position was when he went to war or how far his strategic environment had been impaired. Not only was he bamboozled by his Egyptian ally into believing it would deliver a bigger military punch than it ever intended, but his war plans were in enemy hands. These were not auspicious circumstances for the campaign he had dreamed of since 1967.

The immediate prelude to the war

At a summit meeting in Cairo on 10–12 September 1973 Asad and Sadat welcomed Husayn back to the Arab fold, in a replay of the eleventh-hour Arab reconciliation of 1967. Egypt and Syria agreed to resume diplomatic relations with Jordan on the occasion of the king's decision to release from detention hundreds of Palestinian guerrillas who had survived the Black September butchery. But as usual the new-found cordiality in Cairo covered up much private chicanery. Husayn knew well enough that if he joined Egypt and Syria, when war came he would expose himself to devastating Israeli punishment, but that if he remained aloof he would face an Arab charge of treachery. So in Cairo he publicly mended his fences with the Arab warmongers while giving private assurances to the United States and Israel that, if war broke out, he would do as little fighting as he decently could.[26] Asad's feelings were equally ambivalent: he needed Husayn to plug a gap in his defences, while detesting the king's contacts with Israel. Sadat befriended Husayn for similarly mixed motives: anticipating a bout of postwar peace diplomacy, he wanted to make sure that Jordan would

not upstage him in the United States. To complete the triangle, neither Sadat nor Husayn had any trust in Asad: memories of Ba'thist intrigues against them were still too fresh. Such was the state of Arab harmony on the eve of the October War.

As Husayn had feared, when war came Arab pressures mounted on him to join in, and he quietly sought Israeli permission to move a brigade to the Syrian front, in a plea passed to Kissinger through the British Prime Minister, Edward Heath. In Washington, Kissinger and Simcha Dinitz, the Israeli ambassador, enjoyed the joke. 'Only in the Middle East', Kissinger wrote in his memoirs, 'is it conceivable that a belligerent would ask its adversary's approval for engaging in an act of war against it.'[27] What Kissinger did not add was that, by inviting Israel to protect Jordan when Husayn called for American help in 1970, he had himself created the uncomfortable situation in which Husayn now found himself.

In spite of his conspiratorial youth, the Asad of these early years of power appears to have been outclassed in deviousness by Sadat and Husayn, both of them more experienced in the rough game of Arab politics. Against his two years as president of Syria, Husayn had by 1973 already clocked up two decades on his exposed throne while Sadat had served as long at Nasser's side. Asad's relative innocence was reflected in his war aims, which were quite simply the military reconquest of territory without any clear view of what would follow and without a fallback position in case of failure. On any objective assessment, success was not impossible but hindsight suggests that the odds were heavily stacked against it. It is probable that Asad's enthusiasm for the war which he had seized power to wage and which absorbed all his emotions gave him a blind spot, blotting out any doubts a less committed man might have had about his 'Arab brothers'. Perhaps he lacked the imagination to grasp that, seen from Cairo or Amman, the Arab-Israeli conflict did not have the clear-cut, black and white, good-versus-evil quality which was the traditional view from Damascus.

14

The October Illusion

The October War of 1973 was the Arabs' most considerable military undertaking of modern times. But far from realizing the extravagant hopes they placed in it, the conflict was to prove politically catastrophic, setting them on a course of disintegration and heightened vulnerability. For Asad it was an occasion of the sharpest disappointment, yet paradoxically it was also the beginning of his regional importance.

In the first twenty-four hours of their surprise attack, launched at 14.00 hours on Saturday 6 October, Egypt and Syria stormed formidable Israeli defence barriers on both the Sinai and Golan fronts. In what the American military historian, Colonel Trevor Dupuy, described as 'one of the most memorable water crossings in the annals of warfare',[1] 100,000 Egyptian troops and over 1,000 tanks were put across the Suez Canal where they overwhelmed Israel's Bar-Lev Line and established five defensive bridgeheads of their own. Meanwhile, Syria flung 35,000 troops and 800 tanks against Israel's fortifications on the Golan Heights, bursting through at several points and almost reaching the rim of the escarpment which overlooks the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River and northern Israel beyond.

These developments caused great elation in the Arab camp as it was evident that Israel's ascendancy was being challenged for the first time since 1948. After living with the shame of the resounding defeats of 1948, 1956 and especially 1967, not to mention countless painful skirmishes in between, the Arabs had now dared to attack – and had proved they could win. The age of impotence seemed to be over. Whatever the outcome of the war, one of its aims, the recovery of self-respect, had been achieved on the first morning.

That morning, several hours before H-Hour, Asad had installed himself in the underground War Room at Damascus GHQ, waiting for the campaign to open with the roar of heavy guns along the whole

length of the 65-kilometre front. This was the battle he had dreamed of for years. He was so excited and preoccupied that he quite forgot that 6 October was his forty-third birthday. 'You're right!' he cried when someone reminded him of it, 'I hadn't noticed.'[2]

For Asad and Sadat, as for the whole Arab world, it was a moment of immense satisfaction, balm for the wounds of the past. The brio, style and courage of the blows struck at the very start were to give both leaders something like a blank cheque on a fund of political capital allowing them much freedom of action thereafter. Early success also gave wide currency in both countries to myths about the war which, by exaggerating triumphs and minimizing setbacks, bore little relation to the final balance sheet.

The story of Egypt's crossing of the Suez Canal is familiar, as are the feats of staff work, engineering, and commando daring which preceded it. At precisely the same minute as the barrage began on the Golan, some 4,000 Egyptian guns and 250 aircraft pounded Israeli forces in Sinai. Under cover of this fire, hundreds of rubber dinghies ferried waves of infantry and their personal missiles across the Canal. The thirty-five forts of the Bar-Lev Line were attacked and in most cases overrun; a forward perimeter was quickly established to deal with Israeli armoured counter-attacks, while high-velocity water jets blasted some eighty passages through the 60-foot-high sand barrier piled up along the eastern bank. Heavy-duty bridges were then thrown across the Canal to carry tanks and mechanized infantry through the gaps and into Sinai.

By the morning of 7 October Israel had lost 300 tanks. It rushed reinforcements south and on Monday, 8 October, three armoured divisions under Generals Sharon, Adan and Mendler, supported by scores of aircraft, counter-attacked the Egyptian bridgeheads. They were driven off with further heavy losses of some 260 tanks. These running battles, in which Israeli forces were frittered away in considerable confusion, constituted in the judgment of the American military historian already quoted, 'the worst defeat in the history of the Israeli Army'.[3]

On the Golan the Syrians faced an obstacle only slightly less daunting than that overcome by their Egyptian partners. Along the entire length of the so-called Purple Line – the 1967 ceasefire line – Israel had dug an anti-tank ditch four metres deep and four to six metres wide, flanked by a high earth embankment and protected by minefields on all sides. Electronic devices, monitored from an observation post 2,000 metres up on Mount Hermon, kept these defences under permanent surveillance. Behind the tank trap was a

network of 112 fortified blockhouses, and behind these the tanks, artillery batteries and infantry of the Golan garrisons. The Syrians knew what they were up against. General Gabriel Bitar, director of military reconnaissance, had drawn up detailed maps of each section of the front by sending combat patrols to scout out Israeli deployments. For months Syrian commandos had rehearsed an assault on a full-scale model of the Hermon strongpoint seized by Israel after the ceasefire in the Six Day War and which Syria was determined to recover. It was to change hands a few times yet.

The Golan is a basalt plateau strewn with rocks of lava from extinct volcanoes whose conical mounds dot the desolate landscape. This strategic battleground wedged between Lebanon to the north and Jordan to the south overlooks Israel on one side and the plain of Damascus on the other. Here on the narrow front Asad had massed a field army 60,000-strong in two echelons, one forward, the other in reserve. It was armed with some 1,300 tanks, almost 600 artillery pieces, 400 anti-aircraft guns and more than 100 batteries of SAM missiles of different varieties.

On 6 October three Syrian infantry divisions, the 5th, 7th and 9th, each with an attached armoured brigade, were thrown across the Purple Line, butting in serried ranks against Israel's defensive screen. At the same time in their well-practised move, helicopter-borne commandos seized the Mount Hermon observation post in hand-to-hand combat, a bold stroke which deprived the Israelis of gunnery spotting and enabled Syrian artillery to target in on Israeli tank formations.

Although fighting along the whole front was intense, the Syrian armoured spearheads made uneven progress: in the north and in the centre opposite Qunaytra, where Israeli defences were stiffer, the 7th and 9th Divisions suffered heavy losses as they crossed the anti-tank ditch, but they still managed to smash their way forward to modest gains. In the south, however, General 'Ali 'Aslan's 5th Division broke clean through the Israeli line and, fanning out swiftly in three columns, drove the outnumbered defenders from much of southern and central Golan. Only the hurried arrival of Israeli tank reservists, pitched piecemeal into battle as soon as they reached the plateau, prevented a total collapse on the morning of 7 October.

Two Syrian armoured divisions, the 1st and 3rd, had been held back in reserve to take advantage of any breakthrough. When in the Damascus War Room Asad and his Chief of Staff Shakkur saw the spectacular progress of the 5th Division, they ordered the 1st Armoured to slice through the centre of the front, just north of the

5th's axis of advance, and attack Israel's key Golan command post at Naffaq, an abandoned village astride the road from Qunaytra to the Jordan.

By the night of 7–8 October, then, two Syrian thrusts, by the 5th Division and the 1st Armoured, were within striking distance of the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan bridges. It seemed as if one more desperate push would get them there, opening up the prospect of the recapture of Syria's territory. Victory, Asad felt, was within his grasp.

The going had been hard, hundreds of tanks lay smashed, but the two-front strategy was working. In Sinai and on the Golan Israel had been dealt severe blows and was giving ground.

The troops the Arabs fielded were new-style armies, very different from the ill-led, ill-trained, under-equipped men whom Israel had routed in 1967. Then the Arabs had stumbled into war without forethought or preparation, whereas the 1973 campaign was preceded by years of meticulous planning and elaborate annual rehearsals. In a sort of backhanded tribute to the enemy, a real effort had been made to recruit better educated and technically more proficient officers and NCOs, chosen on the basis of competence rather than political allegiance. In Syria Asad had put an end to the factionalism which had paralysed and almost wiped out the officer corps, while in Egypt commanders like Chief of Staff Shazly and Chief of Operations Gamasy had thoroughly overhauled the demoralized armed forces inherited from Marshal 'Amer. In both countries the profession of arms enjoyed new status.

Both armies had acquired and mastered advanced Soviet weapons: not only tanks, artillery batteries and aircraft in profusion but also innovations such as man-portable missiles, the anti-tank 'Sagger' and anti-aircraft 'Strella', and, most important of all, SAM-6s mounted on mobile launchers which were used in combat in October 1973 for the first time. These weapons went some way to neutralizing Israel's armour and air supremacy.

Taking a leaf, or rather several, from Israel's 1967 book, Egypt and Syria struck first, caught their enemy off-balance – and announced to the world that it was Israel which had attacked them. Surprise accounted for a good part of the Arabs' initial success. Not only did Israel and the United States simply not believe the Arab war plans they had received, but they misread Arab intentions by misreading Sadat himself whom they thought a buffoon. Israel was foxed by the tight secrecy observed by both Syria and Egypt; by the Arabs' more secure communications (aided by a Swedish-Swiss device known as 'Cryptovox'

purchased by the Syrian armed forces in 1972); and by an active deception plan which may have included the Palestinian attack on the Schoenau transit camp in Austria used by Soviet Jews on their way to Israel. The uproar in Israel when the camp was closed was such that Prime Minister Golda Meir flew to Vienna on 1 October to remonstrate with Chancellor Bruno Kreisky. Israel was much distracted by this affair on the very eve of the conflict. Also effective was the Arab decision to go to war on the Jewish Day of Atonement and during the Islamic fast of Ramadan. Asad kept the date of D-Day very secret, sharing it only with Chief of Staff Shakkur and a handful of senior officers. Foreign Minister Khaddam did not know it, and the war caught him unawares at the UN General Assembly in New York. With Syrian airports closed, he was forced to fly to Turkey and from there embark by car on a long and arduous journey home. One man close to Asad who was let into the secret was the head of his press office, As'ad Kamil Elyas. He was summoned three days before the attack and, in Asad's thorough way, given a series of texts to draft – the first speech to the nation after the outbreak of hostilities, letters to foreign leaders, and so forth – texts which were kept under lock and key and brought out when needed.

Some weeks before the attack an Israeli air reconnaissance mission led by Aviem Sella (an air force officer who was later to gain fame in the 1981 raid on Iraq's nuclear facility and notoriety in 1986 as the handler of Jonathan Jay Pollard, an American spy for Israel in the United States) detected that Syria had acquired mobile SAM-6s. To test these defences, the Israelis entered Syrian air space on 13 September and, when the Syrian air force rose to meet them, shot down twelve Syrian MiGs. But in spite of these heavy losses Asad did not retaliate as some Israelis thought he would, nor did he expose the electronics of his dense SAM network. He was careful to keep his powder dry for the big assault. So successful was Arab dissimulation that as late as the night of 5–6 October the CIA reported that 'neither side appears bent on initiating hostilities. For Egypt a military initiative makes little sense ... For the Syrian president, a military adventure now would be suicidal.'[4]

But perhaps the Arabs' greatest coup was to deny Israel the chance of attacking first. When in the early hours of 6 October it finally became obvious to the Israelis that an Arab attack was coming, Chief of Staff David Elazar recommended a pre-emptive strike against Syrian air bases, but Defence Minister Dayan and Golda Meir herself ruled it out on political grounds. The 1967 blitz had been preceded by three busy weeks spent in persuading international opinion and especially

the United States that Israel was the victim, not the aggressor. These efforts, in the Israeli view, had borne fruit in that they had helped Israel retain the Arab territories it had seized in the war.[5] But in 1973, with the Arabs already at the gate, it was too late to prepare opinion for another muscular demonstration. So the option of pre-emption was rejected and the Arabs managed to get their blow in first, dominating the battlefield for nearly forty-eight hours. 'We were not used to a campaign where the initiative was in the hands of the enemy', Dayan later conceded.[6]

The campaign

What, then, went wrong with the Arab war effort? Briefly, the two-front strategy broke down: Egypt did not advance from the Canal as Syria had expected, Syria fought alone for a long week, and Israel got the better of them one after the other.

Egypt's 'operational pause' from 7 to 14 October lies at the heart of the controversy surrounding the October War. After crossing the Canal, storming the Bar-Lev Line and routing the Israeli tank units defending it, the massive Egyptian force simply dug in. With its back to the Canal, its five divisional bridgeheads were merged into two army bridgeheads defending a strip of desert a mere ten kilometres deep. One or two raiding parties were sent forward but no attempt was made to race in strength for the key Sinai passes controlling the only east-west routes across the peninsula. On 7 October after winning the 'battle of the crossing', and on the 8th after repelling Israel's counter-attack, the Egyptian armies sat tight in their defensive positions. And this was just the moment when Israel, under severe pressure on the Golan, would have been hard put to it to spare the aircraft or the tanks to prevent Egypt from establishing a new line at the passes.

The Russians who had provided the weapons for the campaign were puzzled. 'I don't see why your troops are not advancing', Ambassador Vinogradov objected to Mohamed Heikal, Sadat's confidant. 'Why haven't you consolidated your gains and begun to push on to the passes?' According to the ambassador, an impatient General Secretary Brezhnev had himself asked, 'What is the limit of their limited objectives?' Heikal was one of many Egyptians who felt that an opportunity had been missed:[7]

> It is my belief that had the passes been reached and occupied the whole of Sinai would have been liberated with the incalculable political consequences that would have flowed from such a victory.

But the Egyptians had no intention of moving. The men who mattered were all against it. As has been seen, Sadat's aim was to give the immobile peace process a jolt, not to embark upon large-scale reconquest. The flawless success of the crossing had surprised the Egyptians themselves and their cautious War Minister, General Isma'il, recoiled from further operations which might expose the Egyptian army yet again to destruction in the Sinai wastes. The Chief of Staff, General Shazly, had for two years lavished all his energies on planning to get the army across the Canal – and no further. He passionately opposed advancing beyond the SAM cover and exposing his troops to the superior Israeli air force.[8]

But they had told the Syrians otherwise.

In Damascus Asad and his generals waited from hour to hour for the Egyptians to move and found it utterly incomprehensible that they did not. They constantly expected that the next telegram, or the one after, would bring news of an Egyptian offensive. Heart and soul in their own war and under enormous stress, the Syrian high command had little time to ponder what was happening on the Sinai front. At first their instinct was to explain away Egyptian inactivity as due to some yet undivulged military consideration. Gradually, however, the alarming truth dawned on them that Egypt would not advance and that they were fighting alone. There was as yet no suspicion of Egyptian motives, no thought that they had been betrayed, but bewilderment turned to anguish. 'It was the worst disappointment of the war', Asad recalled.[9]

Israel was very soon aware of Egypt's modest intentions. Its air reconnaissance showed that the troops were digging in, the mobile SAMs were not being moved forward, the deployments were wholly defensive. The Americans were able to confirm these Israeli conclusions with evidence from the horse's mouth. On 7 October, less than twenty-four hours after the start of hostilities, Sadat sent a 'back-channel' message to Kissinger stating his peace terms and adding, 'we do not intend to deepen the engagements or widen the confrontation'. Kissinger promptly shared with Israel's ambassador, Simcha Dinitz, his judgment that Sadat would not extend the war beyond the territory already gained.[10]

Early that morning Dayan ordered the air force into 'immediate, continuous action' against the Syrians. It was, he considered, 'the only force that could stop them'.[11] Given Egyptian inactivity, Dayan realised that nothing needed to be spared for Sinai. With Israel's defences in the southern Golan collapsing, the Israeli high command knew that if Syria's armoured spearheads reached the descent to the Jordan River it would be very difficult to repel them. Already in Israeli minds Syria was identified as an adversary quite different from either Egypt or Jordan, a view summarized by a Dayan aphorism:[12]

> On the Jordanian border we have civilian settlements but no enemy. On the Egyptian border we have an enemy but no settlements. On the Syrian border we have both. If the Syrians get to our settlements it will be calamitous.

For three days, 7, 8 and 9 October, Syrian troops on the Golan faced the full fury of the Israeli air force as, from first light to nightfall, wave after wave of aircraft swooped down to bomb, strafe and napalm their tank concentrations and their fuel and ammunition carriers right back to the Purple Line. The front was turned into an inferno. With the Syrian air force unable to compete, Israel dominated the Golan skies but it lost many planes to Syrian ground fire. According to Asad, the Syrian Operations Room reported that Israel flew an average of 1,000 sorties a day against the Golan and fewer than 50 against the Egyptians in Sinai. (Colonel Dupuy has calculated Israeli sorties against Syria as averaging 500 a day, rising to 600 on 9 October, and has suggested that higher estimates were due to multiple sighting reports.)[13]

While Syrian forces in southern and central Golan were taking the fiercest punishment, the 7th Division in the north, which had been badly hammered in the first two days, now regrouped on the evening of 8 October and prepared for a night advance, protected by darkness from air attack and taking advantage of superior Syrian night-vision equipment. A decisive Syrian push through the exhausted Israeli ranks could still have swung the battle. But the 7th's able commander, Brigadier-General 'Umar Abrash, a graduate of the US Army staff college at Fort Leavenworth, was killed when his command tank was hit. As a result the Syrian offensive was delayed until the morning of 9 October; and although it then made progress, it was halted by massive IAF intervention. Another Israeli disaster was narrowly averted.

Military historians have long debated why the Syrians were stopped. Among the reasons which have been advanced were the greater skill and co-ordination of Israeli tank crews and the fact that the Syrians, often unwilling to yield an inch of hard-won ground even for the purposes of manoeuvre, were imprudently brave. But there is little doubt that the deciding factors were Israel's air superiority over Syria as well as the freedom of the Israeli Air Force to devote its *undivided* attention to the Syrian front. Syrian supply convoys and reinforcements

were disrupted and often almost wiped out by air harassment, while Israeli lines of communication winding up to the Golan were largely undisturbed, the Syrian air force being unable to reach them. The IAF commander, Major-General Binyamin Peled, later claimed that from 5.30 a.m. to 10.30 a.m. on 7 October, when Syrian advance units were poised above the Sea of Galilee, no Israeli ground forces were there to oppose them and they were held only by the IAF.[14]

The Syrian advance was blunted, stopped and then turned. By the evening of 9 October, in spite of repeated and fierce Syrian counter-attacks, Israeli units were back at several points on the Purple Line. That same day Israel widened its air attacks to economic targets deep inside Syria – the oil refinery at Homs, Mediterranean ports, power plants, storage depots – allegedly in retaliation for Syrian ground-to-ground missile firings on Galilee air bases. On 10 October the air force headquarters in Damascus and several civilian buildings came under rocket fire. At this stage civilian morale was high with the euphoria of the first few days still intact and, despite the civilian casualties, the inhabitants of the city were more inclined to race up to the rooftops to watch the air battles than to take shelter in basements. On 11 October reinforced Israeli units with strong air support struck across the Purple Line, fighting their way into the maze of tank traps, minefields and concrete pillboxes which were the forward defences of Damascus. By this time the IAF had wreaked great damage on Syria's SAM net but the Syrian air force was still in action and, although short of tanks, Syrian infantry made lethal use of anti-tank weapons in their retreat.

As the tide turned, Asad's mood remained outwardly serene, earning him a reputation for strong nerves, but his impatience with the Egyptians mounted. Communications between the two high commands lost the brotherly warmth of the prewar period. Syrian prodding became sharper as Egypt was reminded of the commitment it had made to a co-ordinated plan. Following Israel's in-depth raids, Asad called on Sadat to send his bombers against Israeli cities, but, reluctant to escalate the conflict, Sadat demurred. Relations between the allies were not improved. To relieve the pressure which Syria was still bearing alone, its high command then sent a senior officer to Cairo to plead for an immediate Egyptian offensive, an appeal which embarrassed the Egyptians and set in train a debate within the general staff for and against a forward push. But still Egypt did not move. By 13 October, when on the Syrian front Israel was finally held just short of the village of Sa'sa' on the road to Damascus, relations between Syria and Egypt were barely civil.

In those few days from 8 to 13 October 1973 Asad's hopes

evaporated of liberating the Golan and of upsetting by force the regional balance of power. It was a bitter blow. Eight hundred tanks, hundreds of other armoured vehicles, 6,000 men, and much else besides had been lost. The war damage was to be estimated at some $3.5 billion.[15] He could not help a pang of regret for what might have been. 'Had I known', he said later with measured understatement, 'that the Egyptian army was going to settle down a few kilometres beyond the Canal, I would have set my own army less ambitious objectives.'[16]

The Syrian army had fought its way forward and now as stubbornly fought its way back. But instead of being able to threaten Israel, Syria found its own capital coming within range of Israeli artillery. Nevertheless it was not like 1967. There was no shame in what had happened, nothing to conceal from the public or to lie about. The army was neither broken nor defeated. Israel had not destroyed it as a fighting force. On Asad's orders Syrian radio and television provided factual coverage of the war, reporting setbacks as well as successes. The Syrians had been a match for the Israelis whose losses had also been enormous and Asad took comfort in the belief that the cream of the Israeli pilots had fallen to Syria's air defences. His troops had acquitted themselves well and the enemy, having pushed a salient into Syria, had now made itself vulnerable to counter-attack. Asad suspected that on his front the Israelis had had enough. They were not keen to take on his powerful second defence line, far less to attempt to enter Damascus. The outcome was not what he had hoped for but, on the surface at least, Asad took the reverses with composure and faced the Israeli advance with defiance.

After days and nights in the War Room he came above ground about this time and called on his brother-in-law, Muhammad Makhluf whom he found alone, their wives and children having been sent to the 'Alawi mountains. Although the mood in the city had changed with the fortunes of war and people were now nervous and downhearted, Makhluf was surprised to find Asad in good spirits and still optimistic about the future. But not having eaten properly for several days, he was also very hungry. He opened the refrigerator and helped himself to some cheese.

The Egyptian offensive

On Sunday, 14 October, Sadat finally launched an attack into Sinai. After resisting for a whole week all pressure to move from the Canal bridgeheads, he now abruptly changed his mind. What brought this

about? No doubt Egypt's military achievements of the previous week had given him confidence, perhaps even a momentary sense of immunity. The brilliant crossing of the Canal on the 6th, the defeat of the Israeli counter-attack on the 8th, the consolidation of a seemingly impregnable Egyptian defence line on the east bank, all created in his mind the psychological springboard for further action. But Asad was undoubtedly the main reason. The pressure he was applying could no longer be ignored without endangering the Syrian-Egyptian relationship. Sadat had no love for Asad or for the Syrians, nor, as his duplicity over the war plans revealed, would he allow his diplomacy to be derailed by Asad's eagerness to liberate territory. In his eyes the Syrian leader was a provincial soldier of limited experience and political sophistication who lacked his own grasp of high strategy. Yet at this stage of the war Sadat could not afford an open breach with Damascus which might have brought his double-dealing to public attention, and with it an inevitable accusation of betrayal. He needed to maintain his alliance with Syria, both to reinforce the peace diplomacy he was planning and, in the shorter term, to fragment Israeli strength. By 13 October Israeli forces were half way to Damascus and, from Sadat's point of view, a Syrian collapse seemed imminent, which would allow Israel to switch all its forces to his front, putting his own precious gains at risk. For the Canal bridgeheads he had won were all-important to Sadat: in his mind they were his lever on the peace process, his claim to the attention of callous and indifferent foreign statesmen who had disregarded his calls for peace in the prewar years but who could ignore him no longer.

Whatever the exact balance of Sadat's motives, his offensive into the wastes of Sinai on 14 October, like the decision to go to war itself, was dictated by political not military considerations. His top commanders were to a man against it. Chief of Staff Shazly pleaded that this folly, as he saw it, be called off. Third Army Commander General Wasil talked of resignation, while Second Army Commander General Ma'mun first threatened to rebel against his orders, then had a nervous breakdown. War Minister Isma'il overruled all these objections, but admitted the decision to attack was political.

Militarily the Egyptian offensive was grossly ill-conceived. For one thing it was a week late and Israel, which had by this time mobilized its reserves and fought Syria to a standstill, was ready to meet it. In Israeli minds the centre of gravity of the conflict had already moved from the Golan to Sinai.[17] But Egypt's attack was not only late, it was also half-hearted. Instead of punching in strength towards the passes, a move which even at this late stage still had a slim chance of success, Egyptian

armour made four separate thrusts dispersed across a front 150 kilometres wide,[18] and fielding a mere 400 tanks against Israel's 900.[19] In open country, without adequate SAM cover or the support of missile-carrying infantry, these armoured columns were easy game for Israeli anti-tank fire – and for the deadly Israeli air force. By midday it was all over and the mauled remnants crawled back to the bridgeheads: Egypt had lost more than 250 tanks.

News of the long-delayed Egyptian offensive gave Asad and the Syrian high command a brief moment of hope that the fortunes of war might still be reversed and that Egypt might after all redeem its pledges. But its rapid defeat brought gloom even denser than before. Asad was determined that Syria and Egypt should fight on, but now the only prospect was of a stubborn back-to-the-wall defensive war, not the swift splendid campaign he had dreamed of. Not only had Sadat's empty but costly gesture done nothing for the Syrians, but worse still, it laid Egypt open to the manoeuvre which Israel had planned from the beginning and which the Egyptian General Staff had in fact anticipated – that is to say, a reverse crossing of the Canal by Israeli forces to take the Egyptian bridgeheads from the rear. On the night of 15–16 October, Israeli armour slipped through a gap between the Egyptian Second and Third Armies and crossed the waterway at Deversoir at the northern end of the Bitter Lakes. Moving fast and strongly reinforced over the next few days, the Israelis mopped up Egyptian SAM batteries, ambushed convoys, attacked rear headquarters and created general havoc.

Sadat was slow to react to this deadly threat to his whole campaign. He was enormously reluctant to admit a setback, and for several vital days the Israeli crossing was publicly dismissed as no more than a handful of enemy tanks lurking in the Deversoir bushes. No general alert was given for fear of causing panic, although, with the bulk of its armour in Sinai, the Egyptian high command knew that the small strategic reserve west of the Canal could not hold the marauders. The fatal flaw at this critical moment was Sadat's adamant refusal to bring troops and tanks home from the Canal front. When on the 16th Shazly recommended such action, Sadat threatened to court-martial him. Three days later, when the situation had further worsened, Shazly again pleaded for partial withdrawal, but Sadat ruled, 'We will not withdraw a single soldier from the east to the west'.[20] Clearly his obsession to hold on to what he thought was his political ace on the Canal blinded him to the grim reality of his military situation at home. By 22 October Egypt was at Israel's mercy. Encircled by Israeli forces, cut off from their home base and an open prey to the IAF, without

food, water or ammunition, 45,000 men of Egypt's Third Army were helplessly marooned in their Canal bridgehead.

Defence of Damascus

Sadat's deception of Asad went beyond the sabotage of their two-front strategy, which his calamitous eleventh-hour offensive did nothing to restore: it extended to the peace diplomacy which he secretly conducted throughout the conflict. As Asad had understood it, the basis of the Syrian-Egyptian alliance was that the two countries would be as one in war as in peace, keeping each other fully informed, in step so as to prevent the enemy exploiting breaches between them. To go to war had been a joint decision; to make peace must, he thought, be equally co-ordinated. It was only after the war, and to his considerable distress, that Asad discovered that Sadat had been engaged in political activities during the fighting which he had not disclosed to his ally,[21] a situation which perhaps says as much about Asad's relative innocence at the time as about Sadat's craftiness. The Egyptian leader did not feel under any obligation to share with Asad his grand design. As he was something of a fantasist, he believed he was personally, on behalf of all the Arabs, engineering a dramatic breakthrough in the peace process which he had no intention of letting his junior partner disturb.

Only later did Asad learn that Sadat had been in secret communication with Kissinger on almost every day of the war, and had even, on 15 October, on the morrow of his ill-fated Sinai offensive, taken the startling initiative of inviting him to Cairo. And there were many other such overtures. Before the war, from 1970 to 1973, the main thrust of Sadat's diplomacy, as has been seen, was to express his readiness for peace if Israel withdrew to its 1967 frontiers. Eliciting no response, he went to war to break the logjam and then immediately set about attempting to link a ceasefire to an Israeli withdrawal. Such was the tenor of his secret wartime signals to Washington. Asad was kept in the dark. Indeed, he was scarcely aware of the manoeuvrings going on in world capitals and the Security Council. When the Russians broached the subject of a ceasefire, he felt he would have time enough to consider the matter once a resolution was tabled.[22] Equally, he had no wartime contact whatsoever with the United States. Preoccupied with the fighting, he neglected diplomacy.

From 9 October, once Israel had pushed Syria back to the Purple Line, Asad's mind was wholly taken up with the defence of Damascus – and with burgeoning hopes of regaining the initiative. Thanks to a

Soviet airlift, his battered troops were being re-equipped, and a fresh division, the 3rd Armoured, was moved up to man the second-line defences at Sa'sa'. Arab allies were pressed to join the fray, and especially Iraq, the first Arab country Asad had told of his intention to go to war. In fact, shortly before H-Hour on 6 October he had asked the Iraqi ambassador to carry a request for help to President Hasan al-Bakr, and a couple of days later a prominent government minister, Muhammad Haydar, had flown to Baghdad with a more urgent plea. Iraq joined the war on the 10th, committing 100 aircraft, over 300 tanks and some 18,000 men. (Before sending troops to Syria's aid, Iraq felt obliged to ask Moscow to request Iran, Israel's ally, to ease its pressure on Iraq's eastern frontier[23] – an illuminating sidelight on the intricacy of Middle East relationships.) Although the Iraqis suffered heavy losses in their first engagement with the Israelis on 13 October, they and a Jordanian brigade which entered the line on the 14th played a role in strengthening the Syrian ring around the salient which Israel had pushed across the Purple Line towards Damascus. King Faysal of Saudi Arabia also sent some 2,000 troops in a gesture of solidarity, while a Moroccan brigade made a token showing in the foothills of Mount Hermon (a squadron of F-5s which King Hasan had promised to the Arab war effort failed to turn up when its pilots were jailed for an attempted coup against their monarch).

By 20 October, in spite of continued Israeli strategic bombing and artillery shelling of Mezze military airport, Asad felt strong enough to consider a counter-attack against the Israeli salient threatening his capital. But by this time he was beginning to be aware that he faced an even more acute threat from his ally's diplomacy.

US and Soviet factors

In angling for American support in favour of Israel's withdrawal from occupied territory, Sadat was several years behind the times. He had no means of knowing that Henry Kissinger had swung the United States decisively behind Israel with the result that the comprehensive settlement Egypt and Syria were seeking was pie in the sky. The whole war was based on an illusion. Sadat duped Asad and in turn was duped himself.

As early as August 1967, two months after the Six Day War, the Israeli cabinet privately decided that there would be no full withdrawal from Sinai or the Golan but that Israel would instead insist on border changes to be determined in direct negotiations with Egypt and Syria.[24]

As for the West Bank, the seizure of which had been a prime war aim, Israel's ambitions there were greater, varying from a partial to a complete takeover. Such a programme needed American support – in advanced weapons, in credits with which to pay for them, and also in political backing, because large-scale annexation such as was contemplated was frowned on by much of the international community. To win over the United States was Yitzhak Rabin's mission during his five-year stint as ambassador in Washington from February 1968 to March 1973, and he was brilliantly successful. The colourless but clear-sighted Rabin was the architect of his country's alliance with the United States, to which Golda Meir added a powerful dose of emotional advocacy when she became prime minister in March 1969. Rabin and Mrs Meir had a great deal to build on since Israel, after a brief flirtation with neutrality, had consciously chosen to align itself with the West as early as the outbreak of the Korean war in 1950. The trend to seek security treaties with the West reached a climax of sorts in Israel's collusion with Britain and France in the Suez campaign of 1956, and its military skills were then spectacularly confirmed in 1967, inevitably attracting American attention. But in the early 1970s a more formal US-Israeli link was forged – largely due to the efforts of Dr Henry Kissinger.

Ever conscious of his background as a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, members of whose family had died in concentration camps, Kissinger never tried to disguise his deep attachment to Israel nor his friendship and affection for its leaders.[25] But to win support from President Nixon and leading members of the Administration whose commitment to Israel was less fervent than his own, Kissinger portrayed Israel as a US strategic asset in the global struggle against the Soviet Union. Israel's interest in holding on to Arab territory and in retaining ascendancy over the Arabs was presented as an American interest to exclude Soviet influence from the Middle East. Thus Kissinger married America's global concerns to Israel's local ambitions. Such was the fundamental premise of his Middle East thinking when he took control of US foreign policy as National Security Adviser, then also as Secretary of State, rising as Nixon sank into the Watergate scandal to become the tsar of Washington's diplomacy with almost presidential powers.

The growing US-Israeli intimacy was reflected in ever larger credits and arms deliveries. In 1970 Israel received $30 million; in 1971 after the Jordan crisis, in which Kissinger called on Israel to help protect King Husayn, the aid rose to $545 million. And during the October War of 1973 Kissinger called for a $3 billion aid bill (subsequently scaled down to $2.2 billion) to pay for the flood of arms airlifted to

Israel: 33,000 tons of arms and equipment from mid-October to mid-November and an extensive sea-lift after that, far outstripping the Soviet Union's resupply of Syria and Egypt. In 1972 the United States financed 28 per cent of Israel's defence budget; by 1973 this had risen to 42 per cent,[26] and it was to rise a good deal further.

Among the unpublicized landmarks on the road to America's alignment with Israel were Nixon's letter to Golda Meir on 23 July 1970 (promising that the United States would not insist on Israel's accepting the Arab definition of Security Council Resolution 242); a memorandum of understanding of 1 November 1971 (in which the US agreed to supply the engine for the Kfir fighter, itself modelled on French Mirage blueprints obtained by Israeli agents); another memorandum of understanding of 2 February 1972 (in which the US conceded that Israel need not commit itself to full withdrawal from the occupied territories as part of any interim agreement). Most significant of all, the United States undertook to make no move in the Middle East peace process without first discussing it with the Israelis.[27] These secret commitments directed against the Arabs were to become a permanent feature of the Israeli-US relationship.

Kissinger adopted as America's own the main theses of Israeli policy: that Israel had to be stronger than any possible combination of Arab states if it were to consider making concessions; that the Arabs' aspiration to recover territories they had lost in 1967 was 'unrealistic', 'unattainable', indeed a dangerous aim of pro-Soviet 'radicals'. He ruled out the search for a 'comprehensive settlement' between Israel and its neighbours, arguing instead for limited agreements reached in bilateral negotiations between Israel and individual Arab states, in which Israel stood a better chance of retaining territory; above all, he espoused the Israeli view that the PLO could not and should not be considered an interlocutor. In his own dismissive phrase, 'The idea of a Palestinian state run by the PLO was not a subject for serious discourse'.[28] And this was not the end of it. Kissinger argued that making the Arabs wait – in other words frustrating their hopes of a settlement by a 'prolonged stalemate' – was a desirable aim of American diplomacy which would teach the Arabs to moderate their 'impossible' demands and show them the futility of relying on the Soviet Union.[29] He strove to put the United States in sole control of the peace process by excluding not just the Soviet Union but also Western Europe which he judged too friendly to the Arabs.

Yet, at the same time – and it was this aspect of his diplomacy which was later to seem duplicitous – Kissinger encouraged the Arabs to look to the United States for a settlement and to him personally as

the man who could deliver it. Arab leaders who came to rely on him, even Asad to an extent, did not at first realize that he was a dangerous opponent. Not only were they ignorant of the extensive and confidential American-Israeli co-ordination of policies and strategies, but they were slow to grasp that Kissinger was determined to frustrate their aspirations. They did not know that he opposed the widely accepted interpretation of Resolution 242, held by the State Department itself – that Israel should trade 'territory' for 'peace', retreating with only minor adjustments to the 1967 lines. Only much later were they to learn that their central objectives – the recovery of their territory and a fair deal for the Palestinians – had been struck off Kissinger's agenda before he even embarked on his famous Middle East shuttles. Kissinger gave them hints, as in the phrase he often used to Arab envoys – that he would not promise what he could not deliver but would deliver everything he promised. But in the end he hoaxed them. Washington insiders saw what was going on at a relatively early stage, but the enlightenment of the rest of the world, above all of the Arabs, the victims of his diplomacy, had to wait for America's Middle East architecture to be completed in the late 1970s, and they did not learn the full story until the publication in 1979 and 1982 of the two volumes of Kissinger's memoirs.

Given this background, Sadat's prewar and wartime diplomacy could not but fail. By his secret overtures to Kissinger, his expulsion of the Russians to please him, and his double-dealing with Asad, he only weakened what was already a feeble Arab hand.

The US-Israeli alliance was not matched by anything comparable on the other side. Soviet-Egyptian relations were distinctly uneasy and marked by mutual suspicion, while Asad's dealings with Moscow were largely about armaments. The Soviet Union supported the Arab case for full Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines and self-determination for the Palestinians, but there was little co-ordination of strategy, as was illustrated by a political muddle early in the war. On the evening of 6 October, when the Syrian and Egyptian armies were bursting across Israel's defence lines, the Soviet ambassador in Cairo told Sadat that Asad had asked Moscow to work for a ceasefire. Sadat was astounded and rang Damascus for confirmation. Asad vehemently denied the report, and a ceasefire at this point would indeed have made nonsense of his whole war strategy. How did the confusion come about?[30]

The initiative came from the Russians, who favoured an early ceasefire because they wished to avoid a confrontation with the United States and because they feared that their Arab friends could not keep up the early momentum for long. It is also possible that Moscow may

have been misled by its man in Damascus, Ambassador Nurieddin Muhieddinov, who had had an exploratory talk with Asad before the war about the Soviet support Syria could expect in the Security Council when the fighting stopped. A report of this interview, once it had made its way through the Soviet bureaucracy, may have been the basis for the Soviet ambassador's mistaken remark to Sadat on 6 October about Asad wanting a ceasefire. Whatever the origins of this tangled affair, it illustrated how little co-ordination or even plain speaking there was between Arabs and Russians. A few days later on 10 October there was another muddle when the Russians, after what they claimed were 'not easy' discussions with Egypt and Syria, proposed to Kissinger a 'ceasefire in place'. But Sadat and Asad were still not ready to stop fighting, and the episode was just a further example of their poor liaison with Moscow.

In contrast, Kissinger's co-ordination with Tel Aviv, by way of Ambassador Dinitz, embraced goals as well as tactics: he was as determined as Israel's leaders that Israel should end the war without territorial loss and preferably with territorial gain – to rub the Arabs' noses in the folly of attempting to impose a military solution.[31] And in the meantime, as the battle raged, he used ceasefire diplomacy and a massive American airlift to give Israel the time and the means to turn the tables on its opponents.[32] Later he congratulated himself on having held up a Soviet ceasefire proposal for seventy-two hours 'to help the Israeli offensive in Syria'.[33] The Arabs were up against greater odds than they knew.

Ceasefire

When on 16 October, two days after his ill-fated Sinai offensive, Sadat addressed an 'open letter to President Nixon' in the course of a speech in the People's Assembly, Asad was unpleasantly surprised: Sadat was proposing no less than a ceasefire to be followed by a UN-sponsored peace conference. Admittedly Sadat linked his offer to the recovery of the occupied territories and the defence of Palestinian rights, but what was shocking to Asad was Sadat's evident readiness to end the fighting, trusting to American goodwill for a satisfactory aftermath. Asad remained convinced that Israel would yield only if some form of military pressure were kept up. Moreover, Sadat had not consulted him on this important departure from their agreed position. 'I would have preferred' he wrote to Sadat, 'to have seen the proposals outlined by you to the People's Assembly before they were made public . . . It gives

me no pleasure to write these words, but I wish to hide none of my thoughts and opinions from you since we are engaged together in a battle of life and death.' Sadat replied in conciliatory fashion, justifying his initiative by 'my conviction that we must conduct the political and the military battle side by side'. He promised to consult Asad if anything new arose.[34]

Soon, however, he had more urgent things on his mind. As Israeli armour rampaged on the west bank of the Canal, Soviet Premier Kosygin rushed to Cairo on 16 October to urge Sadat to accept a ceasefire in place, without any Israeli commitment to withdraw. Two days later he showed Sadat satellite evidence that no fewer than 300 Israeli tanks and armoured vehicles were behind Egyptian lines. Israel, rearmed by airlifted American weapons, some flown straight to the Sinai battle zone, was now threatening Egypt's Third Army, the port of Suez, and the road to Cairo, indeed raising the spectre of a general Egyptian collapse. The blow to Sadat's morale was terrible. Despairingly he cabled Asad on 19 October:[35]

> We have fought Israel to the fifteenth day. In the first four days Israel was alone . . . but during the last ten days I have, on the Egyptian front, been fighting the United States as well, through the arms it is sending. To put it bluntly, I cannot fight the United States or accept the responsibility before history for the destruction of our armed forces for a second time . . .
> My heart bleeds to tell you this . . .

Asad saw at once that this defeatist message signified the end of the Arabs' military pressure on Israel and the abandonment of their common strategy. Usually a man of calm and restraint, he now raged within the privacy of his office at Sadat's broken nerve. His fighting alliance with Egypt was collapsing. In a last effort to salvage it, he asked an aide to draft a reply[36] to which he put the finishing touches:[37]

> I received your message yesterday with deep emotion. I beg you to look again at the military situation on the northern front and on both sides of the Canal. We see no cause for pessimism. We can continue the struggle against enemy forces, whether they have crossed the Canal or are still fighting east of the Canal. I am convinced that by continuing and intensifying the battle, it will be possible to ensure the destruction of those enemy units that have crossed the Canal.

> My brother Sadat, for the sake of the morale of the fighting troops, it is necessary to emphasize that although the enemy has as a result of an accident been able to break our front, this does not mean it will be able to achieve victory.
> The enemy succeeded in penetrating the northern front several days ago, but the stand we then made and the subsequent heavy fighting have given us greater grounds for optimism. Most points of enemy penetration have been sealed off and I am confident that we shall be able to deal with those remaining in the course of the next few days. I consider it imperative that our armies should maintain their fighting spirit.
> I am sure you appreciate that I have weighed my words with the utmost care and with full realization that we now face the most difficult period of our history . . .
> God be with you.

To this plea Asad received no reply.

The irony was that, although Sadat was by now more than ready for a ceasefire, Kissinger was not. On Brezhnev's urgent invitation he set out for Moscow on 20 October with the ostensible purpose of concerting a superpower formula for bringing the war to a close. But just as he had stalled earlier to give Israel time to threaten Damascus, so, with Egypt in dire straits, he now stalled again to give Israel time to tighten the noose around the Third Army. Even so, he thought he had perhaps moved too fast. 'Possibly I could have delayed my departure [for Moscow] another twenty-four hours – and strengthened Israel's military position still further', he wrote later.[38] While he did not want the Third Army destroyed, which some Israeli generals were pressing for, his diplomacy required an Egypt so enfeebled as to offer little resistance to his postwar plans.

The text he finally agreed with Brezhnev called for a ceasefire in place followed by direct negotiations between the parties under appropriate auspices, to implement Security Council Resolution 242. It was adopted by the Security Council at 12.52 a.m., New York time, on 22 October 1973 as Resolution 338 and was intended to go into effect twelve hours later. Halting the fighting where the armies found themselves left Israel holding new bargaining counters in both Syria and Egypt. The word 'withdrawal', so central to Arab demands, did not appear in the resolution, nor did the word 'Palestine'. Resolution 242 was not spelled out but was left in all its ambiguity, to be

determined by face-to-face talks as Israel had always wanted.

Egypt and Israel promptly accepted the ceasefire, but Syria did not. Asad knew very well that he could not hold out alone, but he was outraged that Sadat had taken him for granted. Nor did he appreciate the two superpowers striking a deal over his head without bothering to consult him. If there was one trait which came to the fore in a crisis, it was his dislike of being pushed around. So he took his time over the UN resolution, striking a defiant pose for a couple of days and trying to salvage some dignity from a profoundly humiliating outcome.

Sadat knew that Asad's feelings were affronted and belatedly tried to conciliate him with a telephone call on the afternoon of 22 October in which he explained that the ceasefire was the result of a superpower agreement. Asad's recollection of the conversation was as follows:

'I know nothing about any agreement', Asad said.

'I thought they had informed you. That's why I didn't do so myself', Sadat lamely replied.

'But *we* are the ones fighting! We are your associates in the war! It was your responsibility to inform me', Asad protested.

'I've explained everything in a letter which my prime minister, 'Aziz Sidqi, is bringing you.'

'I suspend judgment then', Asad replied.[39]

Later that evening, when the ceasefire had come into effect at 18.52 hours Middle East time, Sadat rang Asad again, obviously perturbed that his disgruntled ally had still not publicly complied with it.

'You haven't announced your acceptance of the ceasefire', he complained.

'On what basis do you propose that I should cease fire?' Asad queried. He had already called off his planned counter-offensive against the Israeli salient but was in no mood to make things comfortable for Sadat.

'They have offered to return the territories to us', Sadat assured him.

'I have seen no evidence of that.'

Sadat was exasperated. He could see that Asad was going to hold out, which put him at a disadvantage with the Arab public. 'All right', he said curtly before hanging up. 'You will be seeing Sidqi.'[40]

Asad's temper was not improved by Israel's recapture that day of the Mount Hermon observation post dominating the Golan. After seizing it on the first day of the war Syria had fought off repeated Israeli assaults, but on the night of 22–23 October Israeli helicopter-borne commandos, with air and artillery support, overran the fortress in one of the fiercest engagements of the war. Israel did not believe that its acceptance of the ceasefire inhibited it from operations on the Syrian front, a view not wholly unjustified since Syria had not yet announced its own acceptance.

That same evening Sidqi flew in to Damascus to a chilly reception in the president's office. He apologized for not keeping Asad better informed of the various steps, beginning with Kosygin's visit, which had led Egypt to the ceasefire. His difficult brief was to convince Asad of Sadat's threadbare claim to have won a major Israeli concession, and he began by repeating the very words of Sadat's letter: Egypt had accepted the ceasefire because Israel was going to withdraw from the territories it had occupied in 1967.

'Who promised you that?' Asad asked.

'The Americans and the Soviets.'

'On what guarantee?'

'We are quite sure of it! In any event, if they don't keep their promise, we can return to war. Our troops are still in place.'

'How long will this return of territories take?' Asad enquired.

Sidqi was confident. 'It will start immediately, immediately! And at the latest it will be completed within six months.'

Asad did not believe a word of it. Faced with such ill-founded optimism which offended against his whole reading of the situation, he could only respond gloomily, 'I have heard what you have to say'.[41]

Asad spent 23 October pondering the few choices open to him. At seven a.m. that day his foreign minister, Khaddam, summoned the Arab ambassadors in Damascus to an urgent meeting. He informed them that Syria intended to reject the Security Council Resolution but, seeing that the Palestine problem concerned them all, it wished to know their governments' opinions of the Syrian position, and what contribution their governments could make to Syria's war effort. Answers from Arab capitals started reaching Damascus late that evening, some expressing approval of Syria's rejection of the resolution. But on the request for help there was silence. Khaddam then asked the ambassadors to contact their governments again, whereupon all the Arab countries concurred that Syria had no choice but to accept the resolution.

While these exchanges were in progress, Asad took direct soundings by telephone with a number of Arab leaders – Faysal of Saudi Arabia, Hasan of Morocco, Boumédienne and Qadhafi, Hasan al-Bakr of Iraq and some Gulf rulers. They all sympathized with his predicament and, now that Egypt had pulled out, expressed concern on Syria's behalf. Well into the evening he consulted with the Ba'th party Commands and with the leaders of the National Progressive Front.

Finally he summoned his generals. Sadat's behaviour was still a mystery to them and they were not yet ready to condemn him, but they had to face the facts. The two-front strategy with which they had gone to war had collapsed. If they wished to fight on, they would have to set themselves an independent strategy and take up the struggle at another time. The consensus was to accept the ceasefire and this was done late on the 23rd. But in a last gesture of defiance, Syria's message of acceptance to the UN Secretary-General spelled out its understanding that Resolution 338 called for total Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and the safeguard of Palestinian rights. Israel protested that this formulation changed the sense of the resolution and meant that Syria had not accepted the ceasefire, but to what he took to be an Israeli threat to renew hostilities Asad did not react.

Sadat's more pliant attitude did not serve him well. Paying no regard to the 22 October ceasefire, Israel went all out in the next few days to try to force the surrender of the Third Army and lay siege to the town of Suez. By continuing to hit Egypt hard it seemed not merely to wish to improve its bargaining position but to bring down Sadat himself. It appeared that Golda Meir and her generals thirsted to punish him for catching them napping on 6 October. Nor were they deterred from further assaults by two more Security Council resolutions, 339 on 23 October and 340 two days later, demanding immediate implementation of the ceasefire.

As Sadat's screams for help grew more and more desperate, Brezhnev's anger mounted at Kissinger's apparent tolerance of Israeli violations of a ceasefire which he and Kissinger had worked out together. He suggested the urgent despatch of Soviet and US troops to implement the resolutions, failing which he threatened to act alone. For Kissinger this message from the Kremlin conjured up two spectres: the reinforcement of Soviet forces in an area from which he was determined to expel them, and the horrid thought that Moscow might seek to impose a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement, an outcome which both he and the Israelis were determined to oppose.[42] To heighten the drama to his own advantage and win domestic support, Kissinger chose to portray Brezhnev's impatient message as an 'ultimatum', an unacceptable challenge which the United States could not but take up. He ordered a worldwide alert of US forces to face down the Russians. Israel's local misdemeanours and ceasefire violations were swallowed up in an East-West crisis largely of Kissinger's devising.

In the end he did with some difficulty rein in the vengeful Golda Meir. She wanted Sadat's head, whereas he wanted Sadat's survival

because he grasped that the moderate Egyptian would be more useful to Israel in power than out of it. So their dispute was not really, as it was presented, about honouring ceasefires or treating opponents justly, but about which of them better understood Israel's long-term interests. Kissinger glimpsed the postwar opportunity of setting Egypt on the road to a separate peace – which was to be Asad's biggest nightmare.

15

Duel with Henry Kissinger

The great tug-of-war between Asad and Kissinger for the body and soul of Egypt began even before the October War came messily to an end in a welter of ceasefire violations. Asad knew in his bones that if he and Sadat were to salvage a peace even half-way to their liking, they had to stay together despite the collapse of their war strategy: he could not afford to let Sadat drift off on a path of his own. Their alliance was the only defence of Arab interests he could envisage in the hazardous postwar era. Meanwhile, Kissinger was just as clear-headed about the need to steer Sadat away from Syria and into a new relationship with Israel and the United States. There was therefore something inevitable about the struggle between the still unknown leader of a modest Third World country and the superstar of the international scene. Behind the diplomatic manoeuvrings of the time – the Secretary of State's eye-catching shuttles, the disengagement of the warring armies, the preparations for a Geneva conference – lay a trial of will and strength. Whoever won the tug-of-war for Egypt would win the peace and restructure the region to his advantage.

Asad's first postwar meeting with Sadat took place at Kuwait airport on 1 November 1973, a week after the ceasefire. Gone was the euphoria of their prewar planning. With their relationship overshadowed by Egypt's failure to exploit the Canal crossing, the two men were not at ease. Privately Asad held Sadat to blame for the breakdown of the two-front strategy but he made no public accusation, as he still attributed Sadat's caution in battle to fear or to some military circumstance of which he was unaware. Above all he wanted to keep the spirit of co-operation alive. But Sadat too nursed a grievance. Had his 'Syrian brothers' not got themselves into trouble and called for help, he would not have attacked into Sinai on 14 October, opening the way for Israel's devastating Deversoir crossing. At the meeting there was a certain amount of haughty bluster in his

demeanour which even extended to his hosts, the Amir of Kuwait and members of the royal family who had come to the airport to salute the leaders of the wartime coalition. As Asad and Sadat talked, an Egyptian functionary came to remind them that the Kuwaiti dignitaries were waiting to entertain them at a lunch in their honour, but Sadat ordered him out of the room: 'Let them wait!'[1]

Convinced of the wisdom of his strategy, Sadat was determined to lead the Arabs in peace as he had in war. His head was full of the great things he expected from Henry Kissinger, who was due to pay his first visit to Cairo on 7 November, and from the friendship he meant to forge with the United States. It was agreed that Asad would stop off in Cairo later in the month, on the way to a summit in Algiers where he and Sadat would brief their fellow Arab leaders about the war.

What Sadat did not discuss with Asad, because it was too humiliating, was that Israel had him by the throat. The Egyptian Third Army was on the brink of collapse and the besieged town of Suez was desperately short of food, water and medicines. In the circumstances, Israel was able to extort from him a whole string of concessions: the return of Israeli prisoners of war, the lifting of the blockade of the Bab al-Mandab Straits, and above all direct talks in which a defeated Egypt would be the supplicant. To loosen Israel's hold, Sadat tried to insist that it pull back its forces to the positions it had occupied at the time of the 22 October ceasefire – a ceasefire which Israel had subsequently and repeatedly violated. But Golda Meir would have none of it. So to break the deadlock Kissinger proposed that both sides commit themselves to a more ambitious disengagement of forces in which the 22 October lines, which were the subject of the immediate controversy, would cease to be relevant. Accordingly, on 16 November, an Egyptian and an Israeli general, Gamasy and Yariv, met in a tent under UN auspices at a point known as Kilometre 101 on the Cairo-Suez road to discuss a separation of forces.

While the generals were talking, Asad, en route for the Algiers summit, arrived on 24 November in Cairo where at the Tahra Palace he found Sadat waiting for him in the full dress uniform of a field-marshal. The Egyptian leader at once launched into a long monologue about the problems of troop disengagement on the Sinai front: the Israelis were to pull back so many kilometres and the Egyptians so many, they had demanded such and such and he had countered with such and such. Asad was quite bewildered. This was the first time he had heard the word 'disengagement', a term which had not figured before in Arab military or political discourse.

'What are you doing?' he exclaimed. 'What is this disengagement?

How can you disengage your forces from Israel's when Israel is still facing Syria in combat? Did we go to war to arrive at this? Do you have the right to act alone?' Clearly he did not appreciate how the plight of the Third Army weighed on Sadat's mind.

'Don't you trust me?' Sadat exclaimed. 'Are you accusing me of acting unilaterally?'

Asad soon learned that Sadat was proposing to negotiate a bilateral agreement with Israel to separate their armies, even though nothing of the sort had been foreseen in the prewar planning. It was a painful awakening. As Sadat spoke of the benefits of disengagement, Asad's anger mounted. He recalled 'Aziz Sidqi's assurance that with the ceasefire the great powers had promised the return of the occupied territories.

'Is this a *joint* decision?' he cried. 'You have already gone three-quarters of the way to an agreement with Israel.'

'Surely there is trust between us?' Sadat asked.

'There are actions which belie trust.'

'All right, then!' Sadat said with characteristic impetuousness. 'I'll cancel everything!'

The next day the two men travelled in separate planes to Algiers. When Asad landed, Houari Boumédienne, the Algerian President, took him aside to say that Sadat had flown in a little while earlier complaining of Asad's accusations of unilateral action. 'What do you think is going on?' Asad inquired. 'He is obviously looking after himself', the Algerian drily replied.[2]

Shortly after the Algiers summit, on 29 November, Sadat did indeed cancel the Gamasy-Yariv talks at Kilometre 101 – but not to please Asad. In fact, the initiative to break off the negotiations came from none other than Kissinger. In their tent the generals had made remarkable progress towards separating their respective armies and, by 26 November, had seemed on the point of reaching an ambitious agreement. The terms had been proposed by Yariv: if Egypt withdrew most of its tanks from Sinai, Israel would pull back to the east of the Sinai passes. But rather than welcoming this great stride towards Egyptian-Israeli harmony, Kissinger privately urged the Israelis to go slow,[3] and on his prompting Yariv dropped all further mention of the Sinai passes from his proposals and instead offered Gamasy a straight exchange of Israel's latest conquests on the west bank of the Canal for Egypt's east bank bridgeheads. Angered by this change, which would have done no more than restore the prewar *status quo*, the Egyptians broke off the talks.

Why did Kissinger intervene? He could not allow the generals at

Kilometre 101 to upset his grand design of an Egyptian-Israeli accord sanctioned and endorsed by a UN-sponsored peace conference at Geneva and presided over by the two superpowers. He saw that if Israel were rash enough to agree to a large-scale disengagement in Sinai before a Geneva conference convened, Syria would demand equal treatment on the Golan. But as Israel was unlikely to budge from there, Israeli-Syrian talks would soon be deadlocked, and this would jeopardize Israel's chance of an accord with Egypt. So, to protect Israeli-Egyptian progress from possible Syrian obstruction, Kissinger advised Israel not to give too much away too quickly. Disengagement before Geneva risked giving Syria a veto on Egypt's moves. Kissinger wanted the Russians to attend a Geneva conference, but he had no intention of sharing the peace-brokering with them: they were to be given a role just big enough to prevent them obstructing his plan. To his way of thinking, the sole purpose of Geneva was to give international respectability to the nascent Israeli-Egyptian peace process. Once Israel had struck a deal with Egypt in such a forum, Syria and the other Arabs could do nothing more effectual than howl. Thus he skilfully played his end of the tug-of-war rope.

On 10 December Asad returned to Cairo to attempt to regain some control over his wayward Egyptian partner. Sadat called on him in the imposing but somewhat seedy Qubba Palace, the habitual residence of visiting heads of state, and to quell Asad's fears that he was moving forward on his own, pledged not to attend the Geneva conference unless Kissinger promised substantial Israeli withdrawals on both the Egyptian and Syrian fronts. Sadat argued that the opening session of the conference was likely to be brief and formal because of the forthcoming Israeli elections – due to be held in December 1973 – and negotiations would drag on into the new year, so it would be best for Egypt and Syria to try to recover as much territory as possible before even going to Geneva. As if to set his pledge on record, he summoned Foreign Minister Fahmy to witness it (although, as Asad recalled, Fahmy was not invited to sit down to receive the presidential instructions):[4]

> Tell Kissinger when he comes that I have agreed with President Asad that disengagement lines must be drawn clearly on the map before the Geneva conference. If this does not happen, we are not going to Geneva.

Syria and Egypt, Asad thought with some relief, were now back in tandem. But he was soon to know better.

Three days after Asad's visit Kissinger was at Sadat's side and by the time he left Egypt nothing remained of these promises. Sadat was soon persuaded that there could at this stage be no lines on maps, only a statement of general principles.[5] In other words, there would be no Israeli pullback before Geneva, nor a detailed commitment to withdraw. Far from defending a common Egyptian-Syrian position, Sadat assured Kissinger that, if necessary, he would go to Geneva without Asad. In fact, eager to escape from any Syrian or Soviet control, he welcomed Kissinger's idea of breaking the conference up into bilateral negotiating subgroups. On the latter's urging, Sadat made a further crucial concession: he agreed to the omission from the letter of invitation to the conference of any mention of the Palestinians and he promised that he would not raise the Palestine problem during the negotiations. Kissinger had managed to distance Sadat from his wartime ally and from the displaced Palestinians whose grievance lay at the heart of the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Round one to Kissinger

The first Asad-Kissinger encounter took place in Asad's office in Damascus at 4 p.m. on 15 December 1973 and lasted for six and a half hours. For Kissinger this was the enemy, the most militant of Israel's neighbours, the closest to Moscow, the only substantial obstacle to his plans for the region. Sadat was already half-way out of the Russian orbit and falling over himself for America's friendship; King Husayn, a long-time Western protégé, already had a tacit relationship with Israel; Saudi Arabia was being wooed with American arms and technology. Only Asad held out and was presumed to be radical, intransigent, hostile. Kissinger came to this first meeting with neither goodwill nor good intentions. Since 1967 Syria and the United States had hardly seemed to inhabit the same planet. The country was *terra incognita*. 'Flying into Damascus after six years of no relations was like going to China. We weren't quite sure what we were going to find', Harold Saunders, a Middle East specialist on the National Security Council, remembered.[6]

Asad was just as uninformed about the United States and indeed about the Western world as a whole. The negotiation with Kissinger was his initiation into the great game of international diplomacy which was henceforth to occupy much of his presidency. But although he had already been in power for three years, it was a field in which he was inexperienced: his energies and thoughts had been absorbed by domestic problems and by preparations for the war. Now he found himself fighting a different sort of battle on unfamiliar ground. Still a novice, he did not realize that Kissinger cast him as the enemy, nor did he have a clear grasp of what the Secretary of State was after. He was resentful of America's overt support for Israel – the massive wartime airlift had especially angered him – but he saw in Kissinger's sudden focusing on the Middle East a sign of hope: perhaps the United States wanted a settlement after all. Although the Soviet Union had supplied Egypt and Syria with the arms to fight the October War, few Arabs believed that Moscow had the means to deliver peace. Convinced that it could not, Sadat had turned decisively towards Washington, and even Asad was tempted. Only the United States had leverage over Israel, and Kissinger, now in Damascus, was the world-acclaimed magician of diplomacy. Flattered and intrigued by his presence, Asad was ready to place considerable trust in him.

A few hours before Kissinger's arrival, Asad had received a special envoy from Sadat. This was Ashraf Marwan, Nasser's son-in-law and one of the men to whom Sadat entrusted delicate missions. A lanky, baby-faced intellectual famous for his hyper-volubility, Marwan brought splendid news. He reported that Sadat had the previous day settled with Kissinger everything Asad had discussed in the Qubba Palace: disengagement in both Sinai and the Golan would be agreed before the Geneva conference which was due to open less than a week hence on 21 December. The Sinai line had already been drawn and it was up to Asad to waste no time in drawing the Golan line during Kissinger's visit. There was just one trivial change of plan, Marwan said. Actual implementation of Israel's withdrawal would have to be postponed until early in the new year. Reassured by this report, Asad was reasonably confident that both Syria and Egypt would regain a substantial slice of territory before going to Geneva, that they would not go without it, and that the main purpose of Kissinger's present visit to Damascus was in fact to fix the new line on the Golan. As he waited for the Secretary in his office, he brought out a map and spread it out.

Kissinger arrived at the presidential palace, jovial and affable, grasping Asad by the elbow as he shook his hand warmly, and hailing the new era of friendship between the United States and Syria. Asad stiffened. 'There can be no friendship for the moment', he replied, 'since you have taken sides. But at least we can work to eliminate differences.'[7] Kissinger was not used to Arab leaders who resisted his charm. The duel between the two men began in earnest as an exercise in verbal staying-power. Kissinger, in professorial style, opened with an hour-long presentation intended, it would seem, to establish his intellectual ascendancy, to which Asad listened impassively before

remarking with a small smile that roles in life were sometimes reversed. A professor could turn statesman, a president become a professor. Whereupon he launched into an hour-long speech of his own outlining the premises and principles of Syria's foreign policy, a statement which Kissinger subsequently wryly referred to as Asad's first 'lesson'.[8]

Undoubtedly there was something didactic in Asad's manner: he wanted to be quite sure that Kissinger understood the necessary historical background to the issues at stake, and he did not mind taking plenty of time to explain himself. In any event, he was by nature digressive and was accustomed to meetings lasting several hours, having been brought up on interminable Ba'th party discussions. But long-windedness was also a negotiating technique, instinctive at this early point in his diplomatic career but later perfected and deliberate. The aim of the wearisome preliminaries became the wearing down of his interlocutor so as to gain the psychological advantage and eventually control him. Over the years more than one American envoy was to wilt under the relentless lectures to which he compelled them to listen. But in Kissinger Asad had met his match.

After the early jousting at their first meeting Kissinger was anxious to move to the practical details of convening the Geneva conference. He spoke of the problem of drafting a letter of invitation to suit everyone, and suggested that it would be wiser to postpone the difficult question of Palestinian participation; he explained his preference for negotiations in subgroups rather than in plenary session; he tried to probe the extent of Asad's commitment to a Soviet role.

Asad put three direct questions which were to him the heart of the matter: Did the United States agree that Syria could not surrender any territory? Did it agree that there could be no peace without the Palestinians? Would the Geneva conference address these central questions or would it be a time-wasting exercise?

Faced with questions he had no intention of answering, Kissinger took refuge in 'constructive ambiguity':[9] the answers to Asad's questions, he explained, would emerge only in negotiations. But with disengagement and the recovery of territory at the front of his mind, Asad found this most unsatisfactory and, turning to a map of the Golan, he tried there and then to draw the reluctant Kissinger into a discussion of Syrian claims. Israel should withdraw, he declared, not only from the salient captured in October but also from much of the Golan seized in 1967. Kissinger backed sharply away.

The following is Asad's recollection of their exchange:

'What then did you agree with Sadat?' he asked, suddenly uneasy.

'We agreed about the Geneva conference', Kissinger replied.

'Is that all? I was in Cairo a few days ago and Sadat assured me he would reach an agreement with you about disengagement before we went to Geneva.'

'Nothing of the sort took place', Kissinger said.

'But just two hours ago Ashraf Marwan was here to say that you and Sadat had agreed on that.'

'Well', said Kissinger, 'We did briefly discuss the Egyptian front, but we did not discuss the Syrian front at all. And we did not link progress on disengagement to the Geneva conference.'

'Sadat informed me otherwise. He insisted to me that we would not go to Geneva unless disengagement on both fronts was agreed.'

'Nothing of the sort took place', Kissinger repeated.

Asad was still not ready to give in. 'But what I agreed with Sadat was at Sadat's own suggestion. Unless disengagement lines are drawn, Syria will not go to Geneva and neither will Egypt.'[10]

In spite of his brave words, Asad had suffered a shock. Clearly Sadat's pledges meant nothing. He was saying one thing to Kissinger and another to Asad and under these circumstances, with the Arabs at odds, it would be extremely dangerous to go to Geneva. Asad took an instant mental decision not to attend the conference. If he stayed away, Sadat might not go either, or, if he did, he would surely not dare to venture too far ahead in Syria's absence.

So Asad let Kissinger continue discussing the conference, raising no objection to the proposed date or to the suggested phrasing of the invitation. Eventually Kissinger asked him which day he planned to travel and who would be accompanying him.

'Nobody is going', Asad said calmly.

'What do you mean, nobody is going? Didn't we agree a date just now?'

'You asked my opinion about the date and about the letter. I raised no objection because these matters are no longer my concern.' Asad was pleased to have sprung a small surprise.[11]

He felt that by this tactic he had at least put some check on Sadat and that nothing irretrievable had been lost. But what he did not realize was that he had played straight into Kissinger's hands for, far from regretting Asad's decision to stay away, Kissinger was positively gleeful. He had engineered the breakdown of the overly successful talks at Kilometre 101 precisely to keep Syria out of the picture. Now he was only too happy to lock Egypt into a solitary embrace with Israel at Geneva. This was the bilateral relationship he wanted to nourish. If Jordan came as well, it could cause no trouble, but Syria was another matter.

Kissinger reported to President Nixon a day or two later:[12]

> The Syrian non-participation decision is very satisfactory for us – a blessing in disguise . . . We should let Asad stew in his own juice . . . As I look ahead, I believe there is a real chance of an Egyptian-Israeli agreement on disengagement.

The United States, he continued, should make clear to the Soviet Union that supplying Syria with arms could contribute to another Middle East war, which would have a serious effect on US-Soviet relations. As for supplying Israel, 'our continuing sea pipeline of arms is absolutely essential'.

There could be no clearer statement of Kissinger's aims and sympathies. He could congratulate himself on his performance in the tug-of-war so far.

Conflicting perceptions

The Arabs and the Israelis had fundamentally different perceptions of the meaning of the October War. With characteristic hyperbole, the Arabs believed it had changed the world, broken the stalemate, avenged the 1967 defeat, and restored their self-respect. They felt they had earned the right to be taken seriously and were ready to exchange 'peace' for 'land' in accordance with the provisions of Resolution 242, putting an end to a conflict which had absorbed their energies for over thirty years. Their initial victories were trumpeted by the official Arab media and the later setbacks glossed over as if they did not matter. Their message to Israel was: you have seen what we can do. Settle now or we will in due course have to fight again.

The October War was no less of a watershed for Israel but the conclusions it drew were very different. Its leaders were outraged that the Arabs had dared commit the *lèse-majesté* of attacking them. Indignation was salted with a touch of alarm, for the war had made a dent in Israel's perception of itself after 1967 as a mini-superpower. The early Arab successes had caused deep despondency, plunging Dayan into pessimism and indecision. He called the war an earthqake, and his reputation never fully recovered from it. So, having plucked victory from what had, for a moment, looked like defeat, Israel's instinct was to punish the Arabs, not reward them, and there was no inclination to seek a comprehensive settlement involving the return of territory on all fronts. On the contrary, Israel's priorities were to deny

the Arabs the fruits of war, prevent them from ever again developing a two-front strategy, reassert Israeli military supremacy and dismiss Palestinian claims, preferably for ever. Above all, Israel was anxious to exploit to the full its new leverage over Egypt.

Where did Kissinger stand between these rival perceptions? As has been seen, he first ensured a free hand for himself by elbowing aside the Soviets, the Europeans, the non-aligned and the UN Secretary-General. Then he sold the United States to the Arabs as the one power which could get Israel to withdraw, and himself – the architect of détente, of the opening to China, and of the Vietnam settlement – as the diplomatic wizard who alone could deliver such an outcome. Early in November 1973 he gave an interview to the Arab world's leading journalist, Mohamed Heikal of Cairo's *al-Ahram*, an interview which reverberated round the region. 'The Soviet Union can give you arms, but the United States can give you a fair solution by which your lands will be returned to you.'[13] The irony was that, by and large and in the crucial months from October 1973 to early 1975, Arab leaders believed him. It was their ignorance of the Nixon Administration's record, to which their long breach with Washington contributed, which led them to nourish hopes of Kissinger's diplomacy. They did not know that he had undermined the Rogers Plan for a comprehensive settlement; that he had deliberately ignored Sadat's peace overtures before the war; that he had dismissed the Palestinian case out of hand; and that he had pressed for a full US alliance with Israel backed by arms and funds on an unprecedented scale. Evidently his post-October War strategy was directed to securing Israel's objectives and undermining those of the Arabs. Paradoxically, the vociferous right in Israel was far from happy with his performance, believing he could have done still more, and holding him responsible for 'saving' the Egyptian Third Army.

The Geneva conference, and Sinai one

A week after his visit to Damascus Kissinger stage-managed the Geneva conference which opened at the Palais des Nations on 21 December 1973, only to adjourn after ceremonial speeches that same afternoon – and not so far to meet again.

The host was the UN Secretary-General, Kurt Waldheim, the co-chairmen were Kissinger and Gromyko, and the only participants were the foreign ministers of Israel, Egypt and Jordan. Syria was represented by a nameplate and an empty chair. Was this brief gathering a non-event? Kissinger did not think so. In the eyes of the world the

conference was the forum in which was to be negotiated the implementation of Security Council Resolution 242. This was the burden of the speeches by Gromyko, Isma'il Fahmy of Egypt and Zayd Rifa'i of Jordan who all spoke of the need for a total Israeli withdrawal, for Palestinian self-determination and the dawning of peace. Kissinger let them speak, confident that his real objective of an Egyptian-Israeli agreement would now have international sanction. The multilateral forum was a fig-leaf for the bilateral deal he had in mind. Geneva *legitimized* his secret diplomacy, giving it respectable endorsement. Everyone was fooled – the Russians who thought they had a role to play, the Egyptians and Jordanians who accepted Kissinger's assurances that this was a first step towards the full implementation of Resolution 242, even the absent Asad who allowed Syria's name to remain on the table.

Less than a month later, on 18 January 1974, Egypt and Israel signed an agreement to disengage their forces in Sinai. It would have come sooner but for the interruption of the Israeli elections on 31 December which returned Golda Meir's Labour Alignment to power with a smaller majority. 'Sinai One', as the agreement came to be known, was stitched together by Kissinger in a seven-day shuttle between Jerusalem and the oasis of Aswan on the Upper Nile where Sadat had gone to enjoy what is perhaps the best winter climate in the world. Here Sadat, at Kissinger's prompting, began making the concessions which were to undermine the Arabs' strategic position for years to come. There were extenuating circumstances. Suez and the Third Army were still at Israel's mercy and he was desperate to bring them relief. Yet his poor hand was partly of his own making, seeing that he had thrown away whatever leverage Soviet support might have provided and squandered Arab strength by dissolving his wartime bond with Syria. He stood alone and defenceless, and Israel with Kissinger's help made a meal of him.

Sadat had hoped Israel would pull back east of the Sinai passes and that Egypt would be able to retain a force of some two divisions and 200 tanks on the east bank of the Canal, a deal which would have gone some way to justify the vast sacrifices of the war. But it was not to be. Instead, in one climbdown after another, he left the passes in Israel's hands, whittled down his own strength on the east bank to a trivial 7,000 men and thirty tanks – and even these few tanks he seemed prepared to give up. Heikal described the scene:[14]

> General Gamasy, the Director of Operations, could not believe his ears. 'What a heavy price we paid to get our tanks into Sinai,' he said . . . He went over to the window and I saw that he was in tears. Kissinger . . . noticed Gamasy's emotion and was irritated by it. 'Is anything the matter, General?' he asked.

What Gamasy found most difficult to stomach was a ban on SAMs and on long-range artillery in a 30-kilometre zone each side of the Egyptian and Israeli front lines, between which had been squeezed a UNEF-patrolled buffer zone. Egypt had now to withdraw its anti-aircraft defences not just from the Sinai bank of the Canal but from the west bank as well, re-siting them deeper into Egypt. There were many other concessions: the Bab al-Mandab Straits and the Suez Canal would be open to Israeli shipping; as a warrant of Egyptian good intentions, an immediate start would be made to rebuild the devastated cities along the Canal; Egypt would not allow Palestinian raids into Israeli-occupied territory or conduct hostile propaganda against Israel; US reconnaissance aircraft would monitor the agreement. Israel had pressed for a formal Egyptian declaration of non-belligerency which at this stage it did not get, but with Sinai One Egypt took a big step out of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In return Egypt was at last able to supply its hard-pressed Third Army.

But Egypt had to swallow another bitter pill. Before pulling back across the Canal the Israelis dismantled and shipped home plant from the Suez oil refinery and from a neighbouring fertilizer factory as well as cranes and harbour machinery from Adabiya. What they could not take they blew up. They bulldozed thousands of tons of earth and sand into the conduit bringing fresh water to Suez, blocking it over a five-mile stretch. Contemplating the pillage and destruction, General Shazly wondered whether in some perverse way Israel liked living in a climate of hatred.[15]

Reporting to Asad

'Do you understand the meaning of what you are doing?' Asad in Damascus shouted down the telephone to Sadat in Aswan. 'It means that Israel will move to our front every tank and gun it has in Sinai.' He had heard that the very next day, 18 January 1974, the Chiefs of Staff of Egypt and Israel were to sign the disengagement agreement at Kilometre 101 and this was his futile, eleventh-hour attempt to stop it. Sadat tried to calm him down. He was about to set off on a Middle East tour to explain his policies to Arab leaders. 'Don't worry!' he cried, 'I'll come to see you tomorrow.'

'All right, *ahlan wa sahlan*! But you should understand the danger of signing such an agreement.'[16]

Gone were the days of the comradely têtes-à-têtes. When Sadat and his party flew in to Damascus on 19 January they faced a Syrian delegation headed by an icy Asad across a table in an airport conference room. As Asad recalled, Sadat opened the nine-hour encounter in defiant mood.

'What do you mean by saying that I am entering into a purely bilateral arrangement?'

'I mean that Egypt is leaving the battle', Asad said bluntly. 'Israeli troops opposite you will now be moved to the Golan.'

'But I'm committed to Syria! I always will be!'

Asad first invited members of the Syrian delegation to speak, then when his turn came launched into an impassioned exposition of his notion of commitment. Several countries were 'committed' to Syria in that they condemned Israeli occupation and aggression. Now Egypt with its disengagement agreement would become just another state offering little more than sympathy. Such lukewarm support was unacceptable: the Egyptian army had to stay in the field. 'We committed ourselves jointly to the war, we fought together, how have things now changed?'

After long and inconclusive discussions Sadat suggested that their delegations withdraw, leaving Asad and himself alone. The altercation continued. Was it true, Asad enquired, that the Suez Canal was to be reopened and that Israel would be allowed to use it? 'Do you believe what you read in the newspapers?' Sadat laughed. 'I want to fool Israel. I'm not going to open the Canal.'

Asad returned to his main worry. 'If you think I want you to stay in the field because I'm afraid to fight alone, you are wrong. The issue is not one of fear. The point is I will not be able to justify your move to Arab opinion, and this will certainly cause a loss of confidence. Why are you in such a hurry to disengage? Can't you leave just one point of confrontation? Perhaps just a single unit at the front? This will at least signal to the Israelis – and to the Arabs – that the Egyptian army is still facing Israel and that war could flare up at any moment. Israel would not then be able to relax completely.'

'All right, all right. Put your mind at rest', Sadat said finally. 'I will keep a unit engaged against the Israelis.' But by this time Asad had little faith in such promises.[17] Well before the expiry of the forty-day deadline for Sinai One, the process of mutual withdrawal on the Egyptian front was complete and not a single Egyptian unit remained engaged.

Isolating Asad

Asad and Kissinger then began to circle each other as attention shifted to a possible disengagement on the Syrian front. Kissinger knew that Israel was determined not to give up the Golan: it had not been inclined to surrender these strategic heights before the war, still less after Syria's breakthrough in October. Golda Meir's view was that the Syrians should be given not an inch for their temerity. But Kissinger's interest – and he argued to Mrs Meir, Israel's interest as well – was to protect Sadat and the Egypt-Israel agreement, and for this a token movement on the Syrian front was necessary however difficult it might be for Israel to swallow. Without a Syrian disengagement agreement Sadat would be isolated in the Arab world and he might then be unable to take further his new relationship with Israel. His first disengagement step might itself be at risk. So Kissinger needed something cosmetic on the Golan to allow the Egyptian-Israeli relationship to flourish.

Asad saw the disengagement process in quite another light, believing optimistically that it would lead in stages to the liberation of the whole of the Golan. This is what his war had been for. In the belief that he was being accommodating, he therefore trimmed his opening demand to the recovery of half the territory – and of course the whole of the salient seized by Israel in October. The contradiction between what Asad expected and what Kissinger intended for him lay at the heart of their struggle in the second round of the prolonged tug-of-war.

At this time Asad still believed that the United States wanted Arab friendship and an honourable settlement. He was attracted, even won over, by the Secretary of State's warmth, wit and apparent sincerity, and the fact that Kissinger was a Jew, in Arab eyes a sort of cousin, was if anything disarming. Sinai One had left Asad in an uncharted landscape. He realized that he was under threat from Egypt's disengagement but not what the precise dangers were or where the next blow would fall. His immediate emotion was anger with Sadat for breaking ranks. When on the morrow of his wrangle with Sadat at Damascus airport, Kissinger came to see him, Asad treated him to an hour and a half's tirade on the subject of Sadat's duplicity, 'its controlled fury [as Kissinger later recalled] all the more impressive for his eerily cold, seemingly unemotional demeanour'.[18] Directed at Sadat but sparing his American Svengali, the outburst showed how far Asad was from suspecting the true objectives of Kissinger's strategy.

Asad's whole nature rebelled against Sadat's way of doing business with Israel. Sadat was volatile, rashly trustful, impetuous and

expansive in negotiation, sweeping quibbles aside in favour of the big picture. Asad was stolid, niggardly, essentially wary. Kissinger was later ruefully to remark that the Syrians and the Israelis were more alike than either cared to admit. But anger was not a useful emotion in Asad's predicament. As he saw it, the fundamental difference between himself and Sadat was that Sadat seemed to think he could get what he wanted by 'taking off [his] uniform', as he promised Golda Meir he would do after the disengagement agreement, whereas Asad was convinced that Israel would give ground only under continued military pressure. The question he now had to ask himself – and ask his generals – was whether Syria dare exert pressure on its own. Did Syria still have a military option?

Syria's circumstances were by no means hopeless. Israel did not have Asad by the throat as it had Sadat; no beleaguered Syrian army depended for its very survival on Israel's mercy; the salient which Israel had pushed forward towards Damascus was itself exposed to harassment and Syria could always mount raids, use its artillery and generally make life uncomfortable. 'We could still wage a war of attrition', Asad concluded, perhaps with more optimism than the situation warranted. 'So long as fighting continued, Israel had not won, and if it had not won that meant it had lost.'[19] Throughout the spring of 1974, as each side prepared for the Golan haggle, the guns were rarely silent at the front. It was Asad's way of signalling that he was not a Sadat and that his interests would have to be seriously addressed. But he had few other assets. He was holding some Israeli prisoners, a useful card but one which Mrs Meir insisted he play before she would even start negotiations. He also hoped to derive some leverage from the oil embargo which the Arab oil states had imposed during the October War and which was still holding in the early weeks of 1974.

On 12 February he flew to Algiers to confer with Boumédienne, Sadat and King Faysal of Saudi Arabia on what the next move should be. As might be expected, Sadat defended his conciliatory strategy as the right way to peace while Asad expressed strong reservations. But the other leaders urged him to proceed with disengagement and, to get things started, they recommended that Syria should give Kissinger a list of the Israeli prisoners it was holding. The POW list written in Arabic was accordingly carried by special messenger from Damascus to Washington where Dr Sabah Kabbani, head of the newly opened Syrian interests section, handed it to Kissinger on 20 February. Asad was well aware of the emotional and political importance of the POWs to Golda Meir and, by giving her the list, was attempting to send her a signal. He thought that the Israelis would understand his gesture and might reciprocate with a positive one of their own. When Dr Kabbani gave the list to Kissinger, he urged that before translating it the Israelis should be made to understand its meaning: it meant that the October War had created a new situation in which Syria was able to take positive steps towards a comprehensive settlement. Kissinger told Kabbani that he would not let the Israelis know that he had the list until he reached Israel on 27 February because, as he claimed, he wanted to use it to extract in exchange an Israeli pledge to comply with Syrian demands concerning the disengagement lines. However, he did not keep that promise. As soon as Kabbani left him, Kissinger contacted Simcha Dinitz and asked him to pass on to Golda Meir the news that the names of the Israeli prisoners were safely in his keeping.[20]

The Arabs' 'oil weapon' was the other big subject for debate at the Algiers summit. Unsheathed in late October, it provided for a ban on some oil shipments to the United States and the Netherlands as well as production cutbacks ranging from 5 to 10 per cent. Even though its effect was more psychological than real, Kissinger was nevertheless resolved to strip Asad ahead of the Golan negotiations of any benefits he might derive from it. So he recruited Sadat to argue for the lifting of the embargo against Asad's view that it should hold long enough to help him in the coming talks. Asad secured such a pledge at Algiers but events were to prove that it was an uncertain commitment as Arab leaders bent over backwards to show goodwill to Kissinger.

The Saudi and Egyptian Foreign Ministers, 'Umar al-Saqqaf and Isma'il Fahmy, were sent to brief Kissinger in Washington on the Algiers resolutions, and immediately fell victim to a characteristic Kissinger ploy. He went personally to the airport to greet them, in itself a rare attention, and embraced them in the Arab manner. Perhaps not distinguishing between personal and official relations, they did not imagine that a man who treated them so warmly could be working to undermine their national interests. But after the affectionate greeting came the bad news: Kissinger told them the president would not receive them under the threat of the oil embargo, and lifting it had to be kept quite separate from the Syrian-Israeli negotiations. After consulting their governments, Saqqaf and Fahmy caved in and the embargo was eventually scrapped on 18 March 1974.

Asad had lost both his cards, the POW list and the oil weapon. But Kissinger was still not satisfied that Asad was as weak as he might be before the start of the negotiations, and did his utmost to shut off any potential source of support for him, either in the Arab world or in Moscow. He realized that if Boumédienne of Algeria, a radical leader

born of a colonial war, could be persuaded of the merits of step-by-step diplomacy, he could be used to put pressure on Asad. So, on several of his Middle East forays, Kissinger found time to call in at Algiers. Then, to sow suspicion between Syria and the Soviet Union, he gave Brezhnev in Moscow on 26 March the startling news that Asad had asked the United States for arms. Between set teeth Brezhnev inquired why the United States had not complied, to which Kissinger replied with a straight face that he was anxious not to fuel the arms race.[21]

The slender basis for this piece of mischief was a teasing exchange which had taken place in Damascus a few weeks earlier. Remembering that Kissinger had justified the airlift of arms to Israel by saying that he could not allow US arms to be defeated by Soviet arms, Asad had jokingly tried to overturn the axiom: what if Syria were to acquire US arms? It would then be US arms versus US arms. Would not Kissinger's argument collapse? In these remarks Asad was not asking for American weapons, but was making a serious point. He wanted to puncture the view, which Kissinger had made official US policy, that the Soviet Union could be kept out of the Middle East by making Israel overwhelmingly strong. 'Let there be no more talk about American weapons versus Soviet weapons', he told the Secretary of State. 'The problem should be pictured not as the US versus the USSR but as Arab against Israeli.'[22] Kissinger got the point all right, but it did not prevent his misquoting Asad in Moscow in the evident hope of stirring things up between the two allies. When the Syrian leader went there himself in April 1974, to talk things over with Brezhnev and Gromyko on the eve of his Golan negotiations, he found he had a certain amount of explaining to do.

These stratagems were reasonably legitimate compared to the one Kissinger used to strip Asad of any possible military option. Kissinger knew that if fighting were to break out again, Sadat might feel obliged to join in, the oil embargo would be revived, the Russians might return to centre stage, and his own diplomacy would be subject to unwelcome constraints. Kissinger's fear was that Iraq, the one Arab state which had given Asad useful military support in the October War, might now come to Syria's aid again, allowing it to resume hostilities or threaten to do so. Determined to prevent this happening, Kissinger, in collusion with the Shah of Iran and the Israelis, fanned into flames in the spring of 1974 a long-smouldering conflict between the Iraqi Kurds and the Baghdad government, so pinning down the Iraqi army at home. Stirring up the Kurds was a well-rehearsed scenario as Israel had been giving the Iraqi Kurds intermittent help for two decades in the belief

that destabilizing Arab states, even those a long way off, was always to its advantage. A first group of Kurds had come to an Israeli base near Ramleh in the mid-1950s for sabotage training, and Rafael Eitan, later Israel's Chief of Staff, had himself paid a clandestine visit to Iraqi Kurdistan. By the mid-1960s Israel had become one of the Kurds' main props.[23]

This murky affair was among the subjects investigated in the wake of the Watergate scandal by a Congressional committee on CIA clandestine operations, under the chairmanship of Congressman Otis Pike (Democrat, New York). The Pike Report completed in January 1976 was considered too sensitive to be released, but was leaked to the *Village Voice*[24] in February and then published by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in 1977. In it Kissinger was reported as explaining the arming and financing of the Kurds as a means to dissuade Iraq from any 'international adventurism' – that is to say, coming to the aid of Syria. The Kurds were never intended to win, merely to sap Iraq's strength. The report continued:

> Our clients [the Kurds], who were encouraged to fight, were not told of this policy. It was a cynical enterprise, even in the context of a clandestine aid operation.

The closest Kissinger came to an admission of such dirty tricks was when he wrote, 'Iran was our ally and was keeping Iraq's armed forces occupied on its eastern frontier, far away from Syria'.[25] But the Kurds paid a heavy price for the Secretary's meddling.

Believing that the United States was helping him realize his national aspirations, the trusting Kurdish leader, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, sent Kissinger a present of rugs and then of a gold and pearl necklace for his bride on the occasion of his wedding in March 1974. But having served the purpose of weakening Iraq, and thereby ensuring that it could not come to Syria's aid, the Kurds were abandoned in a trade-off between Iraq and Iran formalized in the Algiers agreement of 13 June 1975. Iran sealed its frontier to the Kurds, whereupon many were slaughtered by Iraq and tens of thousands displaced from the border areas. In exchange Iraq ceded to Iran joint control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway at the head of the Gulf. By this time a thoroughly disillusioned Barzani had come to realize that he had been cruelly used. There were to be longer-term and still more fateful consequences. The Algiers agreement, wrung out of Iraq under pressure of the Kurdish war, continued to rankle and one reason why the Iraqi ruler, Saddam Husayn, went to war against Iran in 1980 was to tear it up.

So much for the later conseqences of Kissinger's diplomacy, but in the meantime Asad was now isolated and enfeebled, just as the Secretary of State wanted.

Disengagement agreement

Kissinger's month-long Syrian shuttle, 29 April to 29 May 1974, brought Asad for the first time into the blaze of world publicity. There is little doubt that he relished the battle of wits for which both he and Kissinger were well endowed. Harold Saunders, then one of the Secretary's aides, calculated that the protracted duel involved 130 hours of face-to-face talks and no fewer than twenty-six arrivals and departures at Damascus airport.[26] Kissinger made it a habit, and Asad came to expect, that each session began with a 'seminar' on the policies and personalities of world leaders, or on some weighty political topic such as China and the Vietnam negotiations, or the relations between Congress and the executive branch of the American government. Asad was eager to learn about the world and found in Kissinger a ready mentor. As there was something pedagogic in both their natures, the discussions were usually lengthy, and they came to admire, even to like, each other. The well-publicized contest made Asad's reputation as a dogged champion of Syrian interests and as an independent actor in Arab affairs. But if his prestige rose, his gains on the ground were meagre and the whole drama of the shuttle was no more than a classic example of Kissingerian hocus-pocus.

When disengagement was first proposed the Syrian and Israeli positions were far apart. So to narrow the gap Kissinger invited the two countries to send representatives to Washington with new proposals. Moshe Dayan came in late March and was told that Syria would at the very least have to recover the town of Qunaytra as well as a symbolic sliver of land west of the old ceasefire line. The Syrian emissary, General Hikmat al-Shihabi, head of Military Intelligence – who touchingly arrived bearing gifts of inlaid furniture and brassware for the Secretary which were consigned to the State Department basement – was told that Qunaytra was at this stage all Syria could hope to recover. Kissinger won Shihabi's approval of the principle of a three-zone disengagement schema, as in Sinai – that is to say, a UN buffer area flanked by Syrian and Israeli zones of restricted forces and weapons. The stage was thus set for Kissinger's month-long shuttle between Damascus and Jerusalem.

Putting flesh on the bones of the schema was not easy. There were

hiccups over where exactly the Syrian and Israeli forward lines would be drawn, over the size of the UN force in the buffer area, over the depth of the limited force zones, and especially over who was to control the hills overlooking Qunaytra – once, that is, Israel had agreed to give it up. Twice the negotiations were about to collapse altogether, with Kissinger's luggage already on the plane, before Asad called him back. An obstacle which held them up for tedious hours was the matter of Palestinian guerrillas. Israel wanted Asad to promise to prevent *fidayin* raids, but he was equally firm in refusing any such commitment. He was determined not to be lured into becoming Israel's frontier policeman. When the Palestinian issue was first discussed, Kissinger tried to disguise it with a euphemism which he had used successfully in the Sinai accord. Then Egypt and Israel had agreed to refrain from all 'paramilitary' as well as 'military' actions against each other – the former referred to the guerrillas. 'What is this paramilitary action?' Asad asked, pretending puzzlement. He would not accept the term, and for a day or two they played semantic games. At last Asad said, 'Let's speak frankly: you mean the Palestinian resistance. I cannot accept any limitation on their activities in the agreement.' To stop Kissinger pressing the point, he had had published in the Syrian press that day a statement saying that *fidayin* operations would not be included in the proposed separation of forces.[27]

Kissinger understood that the matter was of political rather than practical importance, as Asad had in any event never allowed guerrilla raids against Israel from the Golan. To break the impasse he suggested that the United States inform Israel that it interpreted the Syria-Israel ceasefire to exclude guerrilla raids and that it recognized Israel's right to hit back if it came under guerrilla attack. Kissinger tested this formula on Asad who remarked that what the United States chose to do was no concern of his.[28] The obstacle had been neatly turned. As they talked the heavy guns thundered at the front just down the road. Asad noted that at sticky moments the shelling would intensify, and he recalled that during the Vietnam negotiations Kissinger was said to have strengthened his negotiating hand with bombing raids.

Finally Israel agreed to give up the salient captured in October as well as a narrow ribbon of territory which looped around Qunaytra, symbol of Asad's 1967 defeat. Though it lay in the UN buffer zone and remained out of bounds to his troops, the city was returned to Syrian hands. But before evacuating it the Israelis blew up and bulldozed buildings, water storage tanks and communication lines, as they had done in the Suez area, and were duly condemned for this at the United Nations. The destruction of the town confirmed the Syrians in their

view of the Israelis as latter-day Vandals. But apart from the recovery of Qunaytra, Syria had little to show for the treasure and the 6,000 men lost in the war.

The Israelis gained some satisfaction from an expanded UN force 1,250-strong and from retaining control of the Mount Hermon observation post as well as of the hills immediately west of Qunaytra. Syria and Israel agreed to limit forces and armaments within twenty kilometres of their front lines and not to position SAMs within twenty-five kilometres. The disengagement agreement was signed by military representatives of both countries in Geneva on 31 May 1974.

The substance of the hard-fought bargaining was often trivial – a kilometre here or there – but the time and media exposure invested Asad's encounter with Kissinger with wider significance. Syria won back very little but Asad conducted himself well, fighting for every inch and not falling for flattery as Sadat had done. While accepting US mediation, he did not throw away his friendship with the Soviet Union. Personally and politically he came out of the experience a bigger man.

But herein lay the essence of Kissinger's confidence trick. By the attention he lavished on him, Kissinger persuaded Asad that a process for the recovery of his territory had begun and that a step had been taken towards peace – a peace for which Asad explicitly declared himself to be ready.[29] But Kissinger's aim was not a Syrian-Israeli peace, still less a comprehensive settlement on all fronts; it was an Egyptian-Israeli peace which, by removing Egypt from the military equation, would leave the Syrians, Palestinians and Jordanians at Israel's mercy. The modest Syrian step was a device to allow Kissinger to draw Sadat into more far-reaching commitments.

Kissinger was as assiduous in helping Israel as he was in dividing and undercutting the Arabs. He turned on its head the State Department argument that US support for Israel would alienate the Arabs, asserting the contrary thesis that a strong Israeli-US alliance would force the Arabs to come begging. 'The Arabs may . . . loathe us . . . but . . . they have to come to us'.[30] The strategic relationship forged during the 1970 Jordan crisis was deepened during the October War with the massive arms air and sea lift and a ten-fold increase in funding. Political co-ordination, aimed at protecting Israel from having to negotiate with the Palestinians and from pulling back to the pre-1967 frontiers, became more than ever a part of the relationship. Kissinger understood, and had to teach the Israelis, that disengagement need not be a step towards full withdrawal but could be a substitute for negotiations on final borders.[31]

As before, the Secretary of State acted on the assumption that he

usually knew better than Israel's own leaders what was good for them. It was he who persuaded the Israelis that it was not to their advantage to destroy the Egyptian Third Army; he again who explained that Syrian disengagement was a 'political imperative' to achieve the much-wanted peace with Egypt; he who urged Mrs Meir not to tie the question of Israeli POWs in Syria to Egypt's disengagement as she had wanted to do: this, he explained, would play into Asad's hands and allow him to block Sinai One. It was he who told Dayan to be tougher, advising him that the Arabs should not get the idea that the United States could easily influence Israel. And it was he who counselled Israel not to give up any Golan settlements in the deal with Asad.

These tactical tips were reinforced by secret commitments. Kissinger fell in with Mrs Meir's view that the Palestinians should not figure in the invitations to Geneva and that no other parties would be invited to future meetings 'without the agreement of the initial participants' – in effect giving Israel a veto on future Syrian or PLO participation.[32] Sinai One had been accompanied by a confidential US-Israeli Memorandum of Understanding in which the United States pledged that it would 'make every effort to be fully responsive on a continuing and long-term basis to Israel's military equipment requirements'.[33] Now the Golan agreement was accompanied by another secret Memorandum in which the United States promised to co-ordinate with Israel any future peace initiatives with Syria.[34] On the eve of his Syrian shuttle and to encourage the Israelis to do what was in any event very much to their advantage, Kissinger persuaded President Nixon to waive repayment on $1 billion of the $2.2 billion credit granted to Israel for arms purchases in the October War. A couple of months later a further $500 million was waived. Commenting on these achievements, a leading American academic, Professor Stanley Hoffman, was moved to describe Kissinger as 'in a way the most important political personality of Israel'.[35]

The Arabs also did not go away empty-handed. They too got secret pledges. To Sadat the United States promised to work for full implementation of Resolution 242, and to Asad for full implementation of Resolution 338. But these pledges had been gutted of meaning by Kissinger's contrary and more specific undertakings to Israel.

Epilogue

There was a bizarre epilogue to this phase of Asad's duel with Kissinger. In June 1974 Richard Nixon, by then afflicted by phlebitis and his Watergate miseries, made a swing round the Middle East to

celebrate America's new standing in the region. Between 12 and 18 June he called in on Sadat, Faysal, Asad, Rabin (who had replaced Mrs Meir as premier in April) and Husayn. Nixon wanted acclaim abroad to offset disgrace at home, but the Arabs, who did not understand about Watergate, saw his visit in terms of their own concerns. For them it meant reconciliation with the United States after a long estrangement and American support at the highest level for the honourable peace they longed for. Everywhere, even in Syria, large and friendly crowds turned out to welcome the American President.

Kissinger did not find it a comfortable trip, because the chief seemed to have little insight into his Secretary of State's strategy and kept departing from the script. Nixon pledged to Sadat that he would work for the restoration of Egypt's international frontier in Sinai and spoke of the need to bring the Palestinians into the negotiations – precisely what Kissinger had promised the Israelis he would not do.

Kissinger was to face even greater embarrassment in Syria where the party arrived on 16 June. After the ceremonial niceties – the resumption of diplomatic relations and a promise of a (modest) American aid programme – Asad drew Nixon into his study. This was the moment he had waited for. He began by making an explicit statement of his acceptance of Resolutions 242 and 338 and of his readiness for peace with Israel provided it withdrew to its pre-1967 lines and restored Palestinian rights. He wanted to believe in American good intentions but by this time he needed reassurance. Throughout Kissinger's shuttle, Asad had pressed him for a written undertaking that the United States would support Syria's right to regain the whole of the Golan – but in vain. Now he sought the same pledge, and more, from Nixon. What was America's interpretation of the UN resolutions? Did step-by-step mean making progress on only one front at a time? Did the United States intend Israel to hand back the Golan when it withdrew from Sinai? And how did Nixon envisage Israel's final borders?

Kissinger had built his whole Middle East diplomacy on evading these questions: it was essential for the Arabs to believe one thing while Israel was promised quite another. So Asad's probing created a problem, particularly as Nixon, in the same expansive vein as in Cairo, edged perilously close to giving Asad the assurances he asked for. In a real sense Kissinger was saved by the bell: the American party had that afternoon to catch a plane for Israel. As Nixon moved still closer to Asad's position, Kissinger broke in. 'Mr President', he cried, 'We have to leave. Our time is up. The plane is waiting.' The luckless Nixon made another attempt to answer Asad, and again found himself

interrupted by his Secretary of State. Nixon flushed and said, 'Henry, don't you want me to speak?' Unperturbed, and with affable assertions that the matter could best be dealt with when the president returned to Washington, Kissinger drew the meeting to a close and ushered his chief out to safety.[36]

Reflecting on this curious episode, Asad and his colleagues came to believe that Nixon was ready to commit the United States to the search for a comprehensive settlement, but that Kissinger torpedoed the president's intentions. On 8 August, under threat of impeachment, Nixon resigned and the inexperienced Gerald Ford took over the presidency. Kissinger was more than ever in control. Although he did not then realize it, Asad had lost his duel.

16

1975: The Year Things Fell Apart

Asad was in cheerful mood when, on the signing of the Golan disengagement agreement, he gave a long interview to Arnaud de Borchgrave of *Newsweek*.[1]

> Israel now faces the same problem I had when 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 . . . As when I gave up smoking, Israel will have withdrawal symptoms, but they will get over it.

The burden of his remarks was that now that Israel had started to withdraw, peace was at last in prospect. He made it absolutely clear that he was ready for 'real peace' with Israel, and that once it was achieved there would be no need for demilitarized zones such as Kissinger had so laboriously contrived. He looked forward to negotiating with Israel at Geneva within the framework of Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. His conditions for peace were, as they were to remain, Israeli withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967 and the restoration of Palestinian rights.

De Borchgrave pressed him: 'Even if the decision is to dismantle the State of Israel?'

'I would imagine that what the PLO decides will not exceed the spirit of the UN resolutions. And these do not call for the dismantling of Israel', Asad replied.

These conciliatory words from a man thought to be the hawk among Israel's neighbours reflected Asad's commitment to a settlement in the wake of the October War and his confidence in Henry Kissinger's ability to deliver it. His quarrel with Sadat and the meagre pickings from the Golan agreement had still not seriously dampened his expectations. Moreover, the summer of 1974 was the high

watermark of Syria's new relationship with the United States, and Asad shared the general Arab relief that Washington was at last addressing the area's problems. Arab leaders pressed Kissinger and Nixon to reveal the American peace plan: did they favour complete Israeli withdrawal? Where would the final boundaries lie? Could an American-Palestinian dialogue be arranged? At this stage the Arabs' only real anxieties sprang from their inability to obtain clear answers. Their hopes remained more or less intact.

With his dramatic shuttles, Kissinger had achieved a separation of warring forces in Sinai and on the Golan. But this was only the beginning. As he never tired of reassuring the Arabs,[2] these steps were not ends in themselves but were meant to start a process which, as confidence grew, would lead on to the fundamental problems of Palestinian aspirations, final frontiers and regional security. Asad and Sadat drew great satisfaction from Nixon's pledge that he would work to implement the Security Council resolutions. What then was the next step to be? Symmetry seemed to demand that after Sinai and Golan the disengagement process move to the West Bank. If an Israeli-Jordanian agreement could be reached, providing for a partial Israeli pullback from the Jordan river, this could pave the way for another round – Sinai, Golan, West Bank, and so on – until all the territories had been recovered and a framework agreed for Arab-Israeli coexistence. So great was the eagerness for peace that for some this incremental method seemed too slow. Impatient souls argued that the time had come to abandon step-by-step altogether in favour of one big leap towards peace on all fronts at a reconvened Geneva conference. The Arabs hoped that they had earned the right to peace with honour.

These rosy visions which Asad shared in the summer of 1974 were far removed from political reality, given the very different objectives which Israel and the United States had quietly agreed upon over the previous four years. Israel wished to restore the *status quo* of 1967–73 by which, in ever closer alliance with the United States, it had reigned supreme over the area. It wanted to make quite sure that the Arabs could never again mount a challenge as they had in 1973. The dispute between Arabs and Israelis was really about the shape of the postwar Middle East. There was a great deal of naiveté in the Arabs' faith in the United States at this time and of self-deception in the nature of the 'lesson' they thought they had administered in the October War. They had meant to impress the world, but had managed only to alarm it. Their war had sparked off a great superpower crisis, conjuring up the spectre of a nuclear exchange, and helped to trigger an explosion in oil prices. The trend towards greater control by oil producers over their

industry had in fact started in 1970, but the conflict speeded it up, and the price rises were so steep that they fuelled an anti-Arab backlash which served to erode sympathy for what were legitimate political grievances.

The record suggests, however, that the Arabs' biggest mistake was to be seduced by Kissinger, and they were to pay dearly for their innocence. They failed to grasp that the main American champion of the US-Israeli alliance could not but throw his formidable weight behind their enemy. The pursuit of his design to separate Egypt from Syria by fostering an Egyptian-Israeli relationship under US protection released a host of local demons which were to plague Asad and many others. The vast reordering of the area which Kissinger effected, the reversal of alliances and the consequent breakdown of security, wove a thread of tragedy into Asad's life. A political career which until then had been largely confident and optimistic grew sombre as, with the collapse of his hopes for an honourable postwar settlement, Asad's world became a hostile place. The crucial turning-point came in 1975 when, with the signature of the second Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement, a great chasm opened up in Arab affairs.

Instead of bringing peace, Henry Kissinger's diplomacy plunged the region into unprecedented turbulence, spreading violent disorders which more than a decade later had not abated. Kissinger's achievements in the Middle East have been widely admired, but on examination they proved no less destructive than the havoc he wrought in Chile, where the assassination of Salvador Allende opened the door to the Pinochet dictatorship, or in Cambodia where the extension of the Vietnam war led to the still more terrible dictatorship of the Khmer Rouge.[3] Small countries were sacrificed to ill-considered strategic designs. So it was in the Middle East.

Husayn and the Palestinians

Kissinger started working for a second, more extensive Egyptian-Israeli agreement almost as soon as the ink was dry on the Golan accord. In fact, the main purpose of the Syrian accord was, as has been seen, to give Sadat room to move deeper into a relationship with Israel. But before concluding 'Sinai Two' – as the second Sinai disengagement agreement came to be called – Kissinger had to clear away a few obstacles, and of these the most considerable were what to do about Jordan and, looming behind Jordan, the complex and contentious issue of the Palestinians. Could these somehow be finessed out of the way to allow Sadat to move forward?

King Husayn was understandably anxious not to be left out of Kissinger's diplomacy, but he could not press for a 'separation of forces' on the West Bank as he had scrupulously *not* opened a front against Israel in October 1973. Yet, whatever name was given to the process, he too wanted to begin recovering territory and thought that he had amply earned the right to US support by his long friendship with the West, his crushing of the Palestinian guerrillas, and the risks he had run in his secret contacts with Israel and in his efforts to avoid war.

Kissinger could not ignore Husayn's claims but his efforts to meet them were half-hearted. He made a brief attempt to persuade the Israelis to negotiate with Husayn, arguing that it was in their interest to treat with the king today rather than tomorrow or the day after with 'Arafat and the PLO, who were after all the enemies to be kept out at all costs. He had often won past arguments with Israeli leaders about who was the best judge of Israel's interests, but this time he could not get his way. The Rabin government refused to make even a token withdrawal from the Jordan valley or to slacken in any way Israel's physical hold over the West Bank. It was prepared to offer Husayn a sort of housekeeper's role: he could help run the place under Israeli military occupation. But Husayn could not afford to appear an Israeli vassal, so the Jordan shuttle never got off the ground and Husayn was left to reflect, not for the last time, that in a conflict between his interests and Israel's his voice was scarcely heard in Washington.

The Palestinians were more firmly ruled out of account. Kissinger's shortcomings as a mediator were nowhere more evident than in his attitude towards the Palestinians whose dispossession was the central element of the Arab-Israeli dispute which he was allegedly seeking to defuse. Far from looking for a solution to their plight, he endorsed the Israeli view that no role or recognition should be given them and deliberately turned a deaf ear to their signals. The PLO sent four messages to Kissinger between July and October 1973 calling for a dialogue with the United States. In response General Vernon Walters, then deputy director of the CIA, was sent to meet one of Yasir 'Arafat's aides in Rabat, Morocco, in November but his brief from Kissinger was that 'the United States has no proposals to make'.[4] On 'Arafat's pleading, a second meeting was arranged in March 1974, but once again the Secretary of State stonewalled. He also shied brusquely away when Sadat suggested that he should meet 'Arafat. For Kissinger the PLO was not the advocate of a legitimate national claim but a 'disruptive force', a 'terrorist group', 'unacceptable as a negotiating partner', 'overtly anti-American', 'dedicated to the destruction of two important friends of the United States': Israel and Jordan. A PLO-run

state was 'certain to be irrendentist' and, with Soviet help, was bound to develop into a radical hotbed like Libya or South Yemen, from which operations against Israel would inevitably be mounted.[5]

Holding highly coloured views such as these, indistinguishable from those of Israeli hard-liners, Kissinger encouraged Israel to exclude the PLO from the postwar settlement. Indeed, a prime aim of his step-by-step technique was to ensure that the Palestine question was for ever pushed beyond the horizon. Kissinger's inhibitions may not have derived solely from an understandable reluctance to tackle a difficult subject: he seemed also to suffer from a psychological block, shared by many Jews, about how to treat the losers in Israel's success story. To admit a Palestinian claim to nationhood was seen as undermining the moral and political legitimacy of Israel's own nation-building. Uncomfortable with the Palestinians, Kissinger accepted Israel's strategy of seeing them as a security problem to be dealt with by tough physical means, rather than as a political problem to be solved by negotiation and compromise.

As for the Palestinian leaders' own behaviour, the tragic irony of much that passed for resistance politics was their total irrelevance. They canvassed for support around the world, squabbled among themselves and with Arab hosts, engaged in obscure debates over the wording of revolutionary texts and tried from time to time, usually in vain, to slip a punch through Israel's defences. But Israel was determined to offer them nothing but the sword. The more Arab and international endorsement the PLO received, the more firmly Israel and Kissinger refused to treat with it.

In the autumn of 1974 the Palestinians won unprecedented backing for their national aspirations when on 20 October an Arab summit at Rabat declared the PLO to be the 'sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people'. This decision transferred responsibility for the recovery of the West Bank from King Husayn to the PLO. Chief advocates for the change were Asad and King Faysal who did not wish Husayn to benefit from acting as spokesman for the Palestinians and who hoped to promote the PLO to a negotiating role in Kissinger's diplomacy – such was the extent of Arab wishful thinking. Fresh from this Arab success, Yasir 'Arafat climbed to still greater heights when he addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations on 13 November, winning a standing ovation and observer status for his movement. One memorable line in his hour-long speech was: 'I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand.' So just as the Palestinians thought they were getting somewhere, Kissinger dropped the West Bank from

his agenda, aligning himself yet again with Israel. In the words of Israel's representative at the UN, Ambassador Yosef Tekoah: 'The PLO will remain what it is and where it is – outside the law and outside Palestine'.

'Arafat's efforts to edge his unwieldy movement into a negotiating posture had the effect of causing Kissinger and the Israeli leaders to work all-out for what the Palestinians feared most of all, a separate Egyptian-Israeli deal.

Sinai Two

Asad lost hope in the possibility of a comprehensive settlement early in 1975. His optimism evaporated as with growing alarm he began to see that Kissinger had got the better of him and that American pledges to implement Resolution 242 were worthless. Already in the latter months of 1974 evidence was piling up of Kissinger's true intentions as he tried to narrow the gap between Egypt and Israel in preparation for a second step on the Sinai front, but by the turn of the year the facts were too blatant to be ignored. On 3 December 1974 Rabin candidly stated that the aim of the deal he hoped to strike with Egypt was to isolate Syria.

Not surprisingly, Asad's confidence in Kissinger's step-by-step tactics crumbled, as did his remaining trust in Sadat. Asad angrily warned Sadat that another partial withdrawal in Sinai would only prejudice Syria's chances of recovering the Golan, to which Sadat answered with windy statements that he would accept nothing less than a full Israeli withdrawal from Sinai, the Golan, the West Bank and Jerusalem – all within three months – and moreover that he was confident the United States would ensure it. Such fantasies, flagrantly at odds with what Sadat was himself quietly negotiating with Kissinger, only served to make Asad angrier still.

Battle lines were soon drawn. In mid-January 1975 King Faysal of Saudi Arabia, the Arab world's most respected leader, was given an ecstatic welcome in Damascus where, after endorsing Asad's insistence on a comprehensive Israeli withdrawal and guarantees for Palestinian rights, he promised Syria $350 million in aid. The Egyptian journalist Mohamed Heikal, who was in Damascus for the king's visit, was one of the first Arabs, perhaps the first commentator in any country, to pronounce that Kissinger had no overall plan to solve the Middle East crisis but intended merely to split the Arabs.[6] Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko hurried to Damascus in early February to share with Asad

his alarm that Kissinger was not only dividing the Arabs but also undercutting the Soviets. To counter these dangers Gromyko and Asad called for the immediate resumption of the Geneva conference with the participation of all the parties including the PLO. But this was as much a pipedream as Sadat's vision of an all-round Israeli retreat.

The last phase of the Asad-Kissinger duel was now at hand as the Secretary of State, who had been working behind the scenes on Sinai Two, now pressed forward in spite of cries of concern from all over the Arab world. Taking Egypt out of the Arab military equation ruled out the possibility of war: this was Kissinger's ambition. But to Asad it sounded more like a death sentence for Syria, Jordan and the Palestinians who would then be unable to present any credible check upon Israel's ambitions. The Secretary saw it as stabilizing the region, Asad as overturning the region's balance.

Kissinger paid an exploratory visit to the Middle East in mid-February, three weeks before embarking on 7 March on what he hoped would be his last Egypt-Israel shuttle. Between these visits Asad, in a last-minute attempt to deflect him from his course, again spelled out his views on Middle East peace through Arnaud de Borchgrave of *Newsweek*.

Asad: 'If the Israelis return to the 1967 frontier – and the West Bank and Gaza become a Palestinian state – the last obstacle to a final settlement will have been removed.'

De Borchgrave: 'Could this be a peace treaty with Israel?'

Asad: 'Yes, it could. When everything is settled it will have to be formalized with a formal peace treaty. This is not propaganda. We mean it – seriously and explicitly. You look so surprised from the expression on your face. This is not a new logic in Syria's policy; it is our fundamental position, decided by party leaders.'[7]

A couple of days later Asad returned to these themes in a speech in Damascus:[8]

> For our part we look upon peace in its true sense . . . a peace without occupation, without destitute peoples, and without citizens whose homeland is denied to them . . . Anyone who imagines that the peace process can be piecemeal is mistaken . . . We way now as we have always said – that peace should be based on complete withdrawal from the lands occupied in 1967 and on the full restoration of the rights of the Palestinian Arab people.
>
> It is being said – and we might ask – what are these rights? Our answer is: let the PLO be asked. It is the PLO which will answer and we will support it in its reply.'

This emphasis on the PLO meant two things. First, Asad wanted to promote the PLO as a party in the peace process and was anxious to help 'Arafat in the battle he was then waging with George Habash's rejectionists. Secondly, Asad was aware of the need for Syria and the PLO to stand together as Egypt slipped further out of the Arab camp. He was already looking to his defences. On 8 March, with Kissinger back in the Middle East for the Sinai Two shuttle, Asad announced his readiness to establish a joint military and political command with the PLO, and 'Arafat welcomed the idea.

The next day Kissinger spent four hours with Asad in Damascus. There was real poignancy in an encounter between two men who by this time recognized the irreconcilability of their positions and yet retained a measure of respect for each other. Had Asad liked Kissinger less, he would no doubt have been rougher with the man who was threatening to turn his whole environment upside down. Kissinger's aide Harold Saunders was struck by the Syrian leader's politeness. 'I profoundly disagree with your strategy', he remembered Asad saying, 'But I don't want it to affect our personal relations.' Saunders had rarely seen such civil behaviour between political enemies.[9]

Asad protested to Kissinger at his customary length that a further step in Sinai would be an act of immense significance, destroying Arab solidarity and isolating Syria – precisely what Kissinger had in mind. The latter explained that his policies were dictated by the circumstances of the time: President Ford was still finding his feet and could not risk offending domestic opinion by putting pressure on Israel; Premier Rabin, newly in office with the slimmest of Knesset majorities and contending with fierce right-wing opposition, could advance only cautiously; the PLO successes at Rabat and at the UN were to many alarming rather than reassuring. And once again Kissinger tried to convince Asad that a fresh step in Sinai did not preclude progress on other fronts. But the contradictions between them were total, and from then on the row was out in the open. Asad's mounting anxiety was reflected in numerous statements to the Western media. To the *Washington Post*, for example, he declared that peace could be achieved only 'by a collective Arab movement on all fronts', and not by Kissinger's 'tiny acrobatic movements'.[10] On French television a few days later he asserted:[11]

> Individual, partial or small steps do not spell peace . . . The Americans are clearly aware of our opinion. These steps aim at creating new contradictions from which Israel will benefit . . . To be serious, the movement towards peace must be a collective movement.

Asad's pleas and objections were all swept aside, as they had to be, for Kissinger had by this time accepted the Israeli view that there could be no further concessions of any importance either on the Golan or on the West Bank. Yet Kissinger's mediation between Egypt and Israel was not plain sailing either, and was even suspended for a couple of months at the end of March, as Israel insisted that it would not withdraw from the Sinai passes and oilfields unless Egypt explicitly renounced belligerency. Kissinger would have wished the Israelis to be more flexible, seeing that Sadat was ready to give them the substance of what they wanted, if not yet the politically sensitive words. Once again he claimed to know better than the Israelis. 'If we wanted the 1967 borders', he railed privately against Rabin and his colleagues, 'we could do it with all of world opinion behind us. The strategy was designed to protect you from this. We've avoided drawing up an overall plan for a global settlement.'[12] The Israelis remained unmoved.

But this was only a hiccup and during the summer the process of taking Egypt out was swiftly completed. The landmarks were a meeting in Austria at Salzburg between Presidents Ford and Sadat on 1–2 June and, more to the point, a private haggle between Kissinger and Simcha Dinitz, Israel's ambassador to Washington, early in July in the Virgin Islands where Kissinger was on vacation. Here the deal was struck which finally opened the way for the bilateral Egyptian-Israeli agreement which, despite their tough negotiating tactics, the Israeli leaders had longed for all along. Following a last shuttle in August, Sinai Two, a package of three published and four secret agreements, was initialled on 1 September 1975 and signed in Geneva on 4 September. As the United States was a party to these accords, they were in effect trilateral arrangements establishing a precedent for Camp David three years later. The Soviet Union boycotted the ceremony on the grounds that Kissinger's diplomacy had 'frozen' the Middle East in Israel's favour.

Under the terms of the published agreements[13] Egypt and Israel undertook to resolve their conflict by peaceful means and to proceed towards 'a final and just peace settlement'; they renounced the threat or use of force; non-military cargoes going to or from Israel would be allowed through the Suez Canal; the disengagement of forces was continued with an Israeli pullback of between twenty and forty kilometres to provide a wider UN buffer zone; the Mitla and Giddi passes were demilitarized, although Israel retained a surveillance station near the eastern end of the Giddi pass and continued to control the main route leading down to the Gulf of Suez; Egypt recovered the Abu Rudais oilfields on condition that it shared the road to them with Israel. A major innovation was the stationing in the passes of some two

hundred American technicians to oversee the Egyptian and Israeli early-warning systems.

The American presence, together with that of UNEF and the substantial demilitarization of the whole area from the Canal to the passes, meant that Egypt lost once and for all any ability to put military pressure on Israel. Its role as a combatant in the Arab cause was over.

The United States' secret agreements – one with Egypt, three with Israel – have been extensively leaked.[14] The United States promised Egypt to consult with it on any Israeli violations of the agreement, to help it build an early-warning system in Sinai, and to *attempt* to get new talks going between Syria and Israel. But these crumbs for Sadat were sparse compared to the banquet Kissinger set before Rabin.

The commitments he made to Israel on behalf of the United States were lavish to a degree never seen before. Israel got a promise of $2.5 billion for 1975–6 and further payments to compensate for the loss of Egyptian oil; a guarantee of oil supplies from Iran or, failing that, directly from the United States; and an open-ended undertaking to maintain Israel's military strength. The political engagements were still more far-reaching. The United States pledged that it would not recognize or negotiate with the PLO so long as it did not recognize Israel's right to exist and did not accept Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. This clause, which was to cramp American policy-making thereafter, formalized the veto Kissinger had already given Israel on Palestinian participation in the peace process. The Palestinians found themselves in a Catch 22 situation. To start a dialogue with Washington they had to recognize Israel's national claim while abandoning their own (because 242, and by extension 338, referred to Palestinians only as refugees). More than a decade later the Palestinians were still caught in this impasse.

On the subject of Syria, Kissinger had already agreed with Dinitz in the Virgin Islands that only 'cosmetic' changes need be contemplated on the Golan. Now he got Ford to write the Israelis a letter saying that, in any Golan talks, the United States would take into account Israel's position that it should not return to the 1967 borders. The United States further pledged that Israel would not be pressured to negotiate with Syria, Jordan and Egypt all together, but only with each of them bilaterally. Insofar as Egypt and Jordan were concerned, the United States agreed that there would be no further 'interim steps' before the conclusion of final peace treaties. In other words, these countries had to accept peace on Israel's terms or resign themselves to the continued occupation of their territory.

More generally the United States promised to co-ordinate its peace

strategy with Israel, to make no proposals without first consulting it, and to seek to prevent the adoption of proposals made by others if they seemed contrary to Israel's interest. Israel also wanted a firm US commitment to protect it in the event of Soviet military intervention in the Middle East, but it had to be content with a promise to 'consult' – one of the rare occasions when fear of Congressional objections checked Kissinger's generous hand.

With this elaborate package of agreements, understandings and commitments, Israel secured virtual control over the Middle East policy of the United States. Kissinger had tied the hands of his successors as well as his own. To the nationalist right in Israel, unsatisfied with his achievements, Kissinger was a typical assimilated Jew, anxious to 'find favour' with the Gentile world. Yet in service to the Jewish state, he may one day be seen to rank only behind Theodor Herzl and David Ben Gurion.

Some three weeks after the signing of Sinai Two, Kissinger gave a dinner for Arab delegates to the United Nations who still knew little of his secret agreements. Blandly he assured them that close relations between the United States and the Arab world were 'irreversible', adding that in the days ahead the United States would 'refine its thinking on how the legitimate interests of the Palestinian people can be met in an overall peace'.[15] He was even ready, he said, to work for a second Golan accord. Asad was one Arab who was no longer duped.

Kissinger, who lacked neither courage nor confidence, came to see Asad for the last time on 3 September 1975, on the eve of the signature of Sinai Two. It was a briefer meeting than usual, lasting a little over an hour, and more than a little chilly. Kissinger dangled the bait of further talks on the Golan but Asad had no time to waste on empty charades. By now he felt thoroughly betrayed and was angry with himself for having given even brief credence to Kissinger's assurance that disengagement would proceed in step on both the Egyptian and Syrian fronts and that the United States did not mean to divide the Arabs. Real peace, he told Kissinger wearily, could not be achieved by showering arms on Israel nor by introducing early-warning systems and US technicians, but only by Israeli withdrawal and satisfaction for the Palestinians.

Although he had been outwitted, it was not in Asad's nature to indulge in self-pity. Grimly he faced the truth that, with his environment falling apart, he was compelled to protect himself and his country from the tidal wave of disturbance which swept across the Middle East as a result of Sinai Two. For the Egyptian-Israeli agreement was profoundly destabilizing. The removal of Egypt, the largest and strongest of the Arab states, left the rest of the Arab world with a sharply heightened sense of insecurity. Who would now defend it? Who could act as a brake on Israel's expansion or deter it from striking at will? Ferocious feuds broke out. Egypt quarrelled violently not only with Syria but with Libya and with the Palestinians. Syria and Iraq crossed swords. Feeling that every man's hand was against it, the Palestinian movement became even more fragmented, and in Lebanon was sucked into a murderous war with the Maronites which in length and savagery made the PLO's earlier clash with Husayn seem tame.

The spectre of Israeli hegemony, so humiliating to the Arabs after 1967, now returned to haunt them as hopes awakened by the 1973 war proved vain. For years the Arabs had yearned for a great leader or an Arab coalition or a friendly external power to impose a new regional order so as to even things up between themselves and Israel. Now they found themselves back in the old unhappy stalemate, only matters were far worse than before because Egypt, the linchpin of the Arab system, was no longer Egypt.

All these emotions could be seen reflected in the sombre statement which Asad and the Ba'th party's National Command issued on the day of Kissinger's farewell visit to Damascus. Calling on the Arabs to mobilize in the face of the Zionist enemy, it expressed 'great anxiety' at the 'serious setback' which the Arabs had suffered. It was painfully obvious to Asad and to every thinking Arab that Egypt's pan-Arab phase, which had begun twenty years earlier, was over, at least for the time being. Kissinger had, of course, not done the job single-handed: the knocks Egypt had suffered from Syria's secession, from the Yemen War and the 1967 disaster, and from its economic exhaustion, had helped prepare the ground for its retreat from Arab commitments, for its switch of alliances from Moscow to Washington, and its readiness for dialogue with Israel. But whatever the causes, Sadat's ideological somersault was so complete that it seemed a sort of 'anti-Suez', setting in reverse everything Nasser had stood for.

Quarrel with Iraq

Security considerations were uppermost in Asad's mind as he contemplated the ruin of his relations with Egypt and the final collapse of the wartime alliance. He had always been faithful to Nasser's doctrine that in defence of the region Arabs should unite only with Arabs – a scheme of things in which the Egyptian-Syrian alliance was central. Now Sadat had abandoned Syria and taken Egypt into the

orbit of the United States, Israel and the Shah's Iran. The slanging match which at once erupted between Damascus and Cairo formed one pole of Asad's world in 1975; the other was an equally bitter quarrel with Iraq. Sinai Two did not create the feud between Syria and Iraq, but it exacerbated a rumbling conflict of which the root cause was the gory split in the Ba'th party on 23 February 1966 when 'Aflaq's old guard was put down in blood by the Military Committee in Damascus. Two years later, in 1968, 'Aflaq's Iraqi supporters seized power in Baghdad which immediately became a haven for Syrian exiles. From then on, the two capitals traded plots, accusations and rival claims to party legitimacy. On Asad's accession in 1970 differences were papered over and correct if not wholly amicable relations were restored to the extent that, when Syria went to war in 1973, Iraq lent it valuable aid.

Kissinger's diplomacy tore up this fragile entente. Unable to resist an opportunity to attack a party rival, Iraq's leaders taunted Asad with defeatism over his Golan agreement with Israel, using against him the very accusations he was himself levelling at Sadat: was he not also betraying the Arab cause by courting Kissinger, accepting Resolution 242 and contemplating a peaceful settlement? A long way from the front line and having lost no territory to Israel, Iraq could afford to refuse all truck with the enemy, align itself with Habash's Rejection Front and strike holier-than-thou poses. Asad dismissed such sniping as the bile of men 'who had not fought and who never would fight'. He counter-attacked by charging that Iraq's 1975 accord with Iran over the Shatt al-Arab was a collusion with imperialism, a 'surrender of Arab land' and a betrayal of the 'revolution in Arabistan' – the Arabs' name for Iran's border province of Khuzistan whose population was partly Arabic-speaking and whose 'liberation' was later to figure as an Iraqi war aim in the Gulf War. So envenomed did relations become that even Iraq's aid to Syria in the 1973 war provided a subject of dispute, with Damascus deriding Iraq's help as too little and too late while Baghdad, with self-serving hyperbole, accused Syria of gross ingratitude in not acknowledging that Iraq had saved the day.

If Damascus and Baghdad had not been so much at odds, they might perhaps have been able to resolve their long-standing dispute over the division of Euphrates waters. Rising in Turkey, the Euphrates flows through Syria and Iraq before merging with the Tigris to swell the great Shatt which debouches into the northern Gulf. Dam-building and irrigation projects in all three countries from the 1960s onwards caused a row to break out over the volume of water each was entitled to – a dispute which at the time of writing was far from settled. Iraq's charge in April 1975 was that Syria's great Euphrates dam at Tabqa,

built with Soviet help, and Lake Asad which rose behind it in the 1970s threatened the livelihood of three million Iraqi peasants downstream in the Euphrates basin. The squabble over water rights grew into a vast bone of contention, not to be assuaged by mediation attempts, most notably Saudi efforts. From 1975 onwards the two countries began abusing each other over the airwaves – 'fascist right-wing criminal' was standard invective – arresting each other's sympathizers, moving troops threateningly to the border, and setting off explosions in each other's capitals.

Caught between the fires of Cairo and Baghdad, Asad felt lonely and exposed – and lonelier still when King Faysal of Saudi Arabia was assassinated on 25 March 1975 by an apparently deranged, American-educated member of the royal family. The austere Faysal, a stalwart nationalist, had been a staunch Asad supporter during and after the October War. It was he who took the lead among Arab producers in pumping money into Syria's war-ravaged economy. The oil money, more than capital-starved Syria had ever previously dreamed of, was a sort of consolation prize, feeding an investment and consumer boom and obscuring the disastrous consequences of the October War.

Faysal had first approved of Kissinger's step-by-step diplomacy on the understanding that it would lead to a comprehensive peace, but when this proved a delusion he shared Asad's anger and would undoubtedly have been a powerful ally in the troubled times ahead. So his disappearance from the scene was sorely felt. His successor, King Khalid, was a weaker personality and more susceptible to Washington's arguments. Devotees of conspiracy theories saw in Faysal's murder, preceded by the sudden deaths in the United States of his Foreign Minister, 'Umar al-Saqqaf, and of the governor of the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency, Anwar 'Ali, within days of each other in November 1974, a US-Israeli plot against the Arabs.

Apart from the dissensions it fuelled, Kissinger's peace diplomacy stimulated an unprecedented arms race. Feeling intensely vulnerable, Asad turned for yet more weapons to the Eastern bloc, the only source available to him. He could not hope to fight Israel alone, but could he at least aspire to become strong enough to deter an Israeli attack? This was a puzzle with which he was to wrestle for the rest of his presidency. Thus an immediate result of Sinai Two was to upgrade relations between Damascus and Moscow. In early September, within days of its signature, Asad set off for Czechoslovakia and a few weeks later, on 9 October, arrived in Moscow to review with all the top leaders – President Podgorny, General Secretary Brezhnev, Premier Kosygin, Foreign Minister Gromyko and Defence Minister Grechko –

the dangerous situation in which he now found himself. Asad was grateful for the Soviet arms airlift during the October War – no fewer than 934 return flights – but politically the Russians had been inept, allowing Kissinger to cut them out of postwar diplomacy to Syria's disadvantage. As both Asad and the Soviet leaders saw themselves as victims of the Secretary's of State's scheming, they drew closer together. The great progress made in Syria's infrastructure from the mid-1970s onwards and in the growth of its armed services stemmed from this tighter bond.

The reverse of the coin was a distancing from Washington after the brief honeymoon which began with the restoration of relations in June 1974. Asad did not break with the United States as his hot-tempered predecessors might in the circumstances have done. Whatever the ill it had done him, he accepted that it was the reigning great power which had to be dealt with, so he kept the channel open – for some years in the person of Richard Murphy, US ambassador in Damascus. But from then on Asad never wholly trusted the United States again.

Lost opportunity

Was an opportunity for peace missed after the October War? One of the big 'ifs' of contemporary Middle East history concerns the two years in which Kissinger was in charge. Had the United States wanted a settlement it was uniquely well placed to achieve one: Israel was dependent on its arms and aid, the Arabs welcomed its mediation, and the Soviet Union, Europe and Japan were all out of the picture. So receptive was the Arab mood that Israel could no doubt have secured some territorial adjustments on all fronts, extensive demilitarization and international guarantees, quite apart from the more enduring security which normal relations with its neighbours would have provided.

But the Arabs' case was flawed by their unrealistic belief that their war effort entitled them to a settlement, an expectation further boosted by the oil price explosion – the very factors which alarmed Israel into resisting concessions. The gravest Arab weakness lay as ever in disunity. Built largely on distrust, the Egyptian-Syrian alliance could not resist the battering of war and fell apart. Jordan and the PLO were rivals, each scheming against the other. The Arabs could not easily agree on how to dispose of Palestinian territory, even if Israel had withdrawn from it. Tensions divided oil-rich and oil-poor countries.

Yet beyond such quarrels, which were the very stuff of Arab politics, the eagerness for peace was widely shared.

Israel, however, was not ready for a comprehensive settlement, wanting neither to withdraw to its pre-1967 frontiers nor to treat with the Palestinians. The October War had dented Israel's complacency but failed to persuade it of the need for a radically new approach to its neighbours. The instinct was still to dominate the Arabs, to deter them by overwhelming strength, to break up the Arab front at all costs rather than to seek a stable peace through compromise. Israeli thinking about the Arabs became trapped in the rut of military security. The equation was a simple one: Palestinian terrorism posed no significant threat; the only real danger came from a combined attack by the conventional armies of Egypt and Syria; but once Egypt was removed, Syria alone presented no military problem.[16] That this policy nourished frustrations and hatreds seemed of little account compared to the benefits it conferred. The call for 'defensible frontiers', which meant staying on the Jordan river and the Golan, now melded with an annexationist tendency which had long existed in Zionism.

Into this context Kissinger appeared like a *diabolus ex machina*, enjoying unfettered scope because Nixon's last year and Ford's first were a time of unusual presidential weakness. Devoted to the Israeli cause and endowed through charm, quick wits and tactical skill with extraordinary personal authority, he was able to sweep aside dissenting views whether from the Pentagon, from leading figures of the foreign policy establishment, prominent academics or American ambassadors to key Arab countries. Kissinger even managed to steer two presidents away from the global settlement both appeared to want.

There was perhaps a more particular reason why the opportunity for peace was missed in 1973–5, and this was the manipulative attitude towards the region which Israel had long had but which took root in Washington also as the two countries embarked on their strategic relationship from 1970 onwards. For good reasons of self-defence Israel had early sought close, if usually tacit, relations with the non-Arab states of the region, such as Iran and Ethiopia, in the hope of containing the Arabs by a 'periphery' strategy. It also intervened covertly where and when it could to undermine Arab societies – in the 1960s, for example, by helping the southern Sudanese in their struggle against Khartoum, by helping Iran arm the Yemeni tribes against Nasser during the Yemen civil war, or by arming and funding Iraqi Kurds against Baghdad.

The Israel-Iranian relationship, close from the mid-1950s, grew still more intimate in the 1970s when, under the Nixon Doctrine, these two

proxies were built up with US aid in order to protect America's regional interests. But what they really shared was hostility to the Arabs and it was through them that the United States was drawn into murky waters. The resort to 'dirty tricks' proved addictive. Just as Kissinger made use of the Israeli-Iranian relationship for his Middle East diplomacy, so in southern Africa he put the Israeli-South African relationship to work against African regimes he considered undesirable, such as the left-wing government of Angola which took power in the wake of the Portuguese revolution of 1974. It was not long before Israel was contributing ideas, intelligence and operational capabilities to American strategy in many parts of the world.

Given this wider picture, it was perhaps unreasonable to expect Kissinger's Middle East arrangements to be anything but biased.

17

The Lebanese Trap

With Sinai Two Henry Kissinger and Israel shaped an Arab order to suit their convenience – an order Asad was determined to contest. To accept the *diktat* of Sinai Two would have meant Syria's declining into just another weak state on Israel's borders, another Jordan perhaps, living on sufferance, projecting no power, and devoting much of its military energies to protecting Israel from Palestinian raiding. Such an inglorious fate was utterly repugnant to a man of Asad's touchy nationalism. The slogan of 'steadfastness' that he then launched conveyed the will to fight back and not simply accept an environment in which, with Egypt neutralized, Israeli supremacy was unchallengeable.

With this defiance Asad's Syria took its first steps towards becoming a substantial regional power and Israel's only remaining Arab opponent of any stature. The notion that Damascus is to be reckoned with in Middle East affairs has in recent years become a commonplace. But it was not always so. Memories have faded of its subordinate role in the first decades of independence, when it was a good deal less important than either Cairo or Baghdad and often seemed little more than a political football kicked back and forth between them. In 1955 Syria fell into Egypt's orbit, and spent the next twenty years in the toils of that relationship, whether wedded or divorced, whether allied in war or at odds in peace. Egypt then lay at the centre of the regional power system, the magnetic pole alternately attracting and repelling Syria. This was the world Nasser had made and which shaped Asad's adult thinking. But 1975 shattered the familiar pattern, forcing Asad to forge a new system of power relationships.

Survival was uppermost in his mind as he came to understand that Kissinger had outfoxed him. Sadat had betrayed him, Iraq was hostile, Saudi Arabia after Faysal's death was uncertain. In the exposed middle ground, under the immediate shadow of Israel, lay Syria, with around it Jordan, Lebanon and the mass of volatile and desperate Palestinians.

Vulnerable to Israeli power and manipulation, these fragile societies were now in the firing line. Under this threat Asad's attention was forced to shift away from peace diplomacy and the duel with Kissinger towards his immediate neighbourhood, which became his prime arena of interest. To resist, Syria needed weight, strategic depth, allies. And so was revived an old idea, predating the Anglo-French carve-up of the region, of the essential unity of the Arab Levant with Damascus as its focus. Both his protective envelope and his area of potential weakness, the Levant was the strategic terrain which Asad now struggled to bring under control.

From 1975, therefore, dated Asad's intense interest in every twist of Palestinian politics, in every shift in King Husayn's nimble footwork and, of course, in every chapter of Lebanon's long torment which was to absorb him for the next decade and beyond. Put in bald military terms, his anxiety was that Israel might attack on one of his exposed flanks: a left hook through Lebanon or a right hook through Jordan. But the threat was not only military. Israel might turn his flank politically by gaining a preponderant influence over either of these neighbours, or it might entrap him by escalating its conflict with the Palestinians. What was at stake in the confrontation with Israel was not just Syria's security, although that peril was real enough, but also its nationalist reputation, its regional stature.

Asad's first defensive move was a rare sortie to Lebanon in January 1975 for a meeting with President Sulayman Franjiya. Given huge publicity, this encounter in the sleepy town of Shtura in the Biqa' valley was meant to signal the closer bond Syria wanted with its neighbour at this dangerous time. Syria's interest in Lebanese affairs did not arouse surprise in either country, for in the general perception Syria and Lebanon were members of the same body. Within living memory, the French had enlarged autonomous Mount Lebanon, the home of Maronite Christians and Druzes, to create the Republic of Lebanon by the addition of territories inhabited, as it happened, mainly by Sunni and Shi'i Muslims. The inhabitants of the coastal cities – Tripoli and its hinterland, Beirut itself, Tyre and Sidon – as well as the Biqa' valley and the south thought of themselves as belonging to a larger entity which they called Syria. In culture, religious diversity, ethnic background, spoken dialect, even in what they ate and drank, Syrians and Lebanese were much of a piece. The populations of the two countries were thoroughly intermingled, with countless families straddling the French-drawn frontier. Intimacy did not, however, preclude a certain measure of suspicion and rivalry, even extending to the relative value of the Lebanese and Syrian *lira*, with the

Lebanese currency at that time invariably ahead. Lebanese Christians feared Syrian irredentism, while Syria in turn was wary of Christian Lebanon's traditional ties with the West and its wavering commitment to the Arab cause. But by and large Syrians and Lebanese knew that they belonged together.

As the overspill in both directions was so immediate, each was highly sensitive to developments in the other's country. The mountain frontier was notoriously permeable to smugglers, to political refugees, to troublemakers, to ideas. A coup in Damascus was always the subject of anxious speculation in Beirut, while Damascus tried to make sure of a say in the composition of Lebanese governments and especially in the choice of president as well as of intelligence and security chiefs. The two countries were like connecting vessels: the political temperature of the one could not but affect that of the other.

Syria's involvement with Jordan and the Palestinians was only slightly less intimate. Three months after his meeting with President Franjiya, on the very day in March that Kissinger began the Sinai Two process, Asad invited Yasir 'Arafat's PLO to join Syria in a 'united command' and in June, as Kissinger's wooing of Sadat intensified, Asad responded by proposing a second 'united command', this time to King Husayn of Jordan. On 10 June Asad paid a visit to Jordan, the first by a Syrian ruler since 1957, and declared in the newly revived spirit of regional solidarity that Syria and Jordan were 'one entity and one country'.[1] Even more exposed than Syria to Israeli power and disgruntled at being left out of Kissinger's peace plans, Husayn echoed these sentiments on a return visit to Damascus in August. A long honeymoon between Syria and Jordan followed.

Asad had no illusion about the military value of links with Lebanon, the Palestinians and Jordan: they were political accords, which reflected his concern to protect himself by exerting some control over his immediate environment. Nor was there any great trust between Asad, 'Arafat and Husayn. The three were thrown together in self-defence, in the shared if threadbare hope that, if they closed ranks, Israel could be held.

Civil war

The immediate challenge came from Lebanon.

Civil war broke out in the spring of 1975 and, the fire spreading by leaps and bounds, had by the end of the year claimed thousands of lives, inflicted massive physical damage, partitioned the country

between armed gangs, and destroyed the authority of the state. First and foremost, the warfare in Lebanon posed a security problem for Syria: in Asad's own words at the time, the security of the two countries was indivisible.[2] He reacted to the threat by repeated attempts to stop the fighting and check the drift towards partition. Three trusted subordinates, the energetic, rough-spoken Foreign Minister Khaddam, Chief of Staff Shihabi and Air Force Commander Jamil, were his chosen instruments, making numerous journeys across the mountains to the Lebanese capital to bring the warring parties together. (Lebanon was to engross Khaddam to such an extent over the coming decade that the Lebanese nicknamed him the *wali*, or the governor. Lebanese politicians, however, sometimes complained that life under his thumb was worse than it had been under the French.) The traffic was as heavy in the other direction, as Lebanese and Palestinian leaders of all factions flocked to consult Asad. In 1975 alone he met the PLO fourteen times.

At the heart of the conflict lay the Palestinians. Over 150,000 of them had taken refuge in Lebanon after the 1948 war, a total swollen mainly by natural increase to about 400,000 by the mid-1970s. A considerable number were assimilated into Lebanese life but most of this stateless and wretched population lived on the outskirts of the principal cities in camps which had become part slum, part fortress. Following the PLO's violent showdown with King Husayn in 1970–71 many guerrillas took refuge in Lebanon, turning the hilly 'Arqub region in the southeast of the country, which had been largely neglected by the government, into their stronghold. But the Palestinians' presence was felt far beyond the camps and the remote 'Arqub. As Muslim Lebanon provided a supportive environment, the Palestinians were soon woven into the fabric of life, particularly in West Beirut where the various militias set up their headquarters and where their leaders came to exercise great influence. The *dolce vita* of the capital was more agreeable than the rigours of Fatahland, but there was more to it than that: Lebanon was the only country where Palestinians enjoyed any freedom of movement. Efforts were made to regulate them – notably the Cairo Agreement of 1969 – but paper promises were soon forgotten. When Israeli raids showed that they could expect no protection from the Lebanese army, the Palestinians moved heavy weapons into the refugee camps in a clear breach of the Agreement. Soon the encroachments on Lebanese sovereignty became blatant and beyond counting.

Politically, the Palestinians found allies in the Muslim establishment and, significantly for the future, they also forged alliances with, and helped arm, radical movements which sprang up at that time in Lebanon's permissive climate. Because of this local backing and their own strength, the Palestinians came to throw their weight about, resisting attempts to control them by the weak Lebanese state.

For a decade, from the mid-1960s, the expanding Palestinian presence served increasingly to polarize Lebanese opinion. Muslims, sharing Arab nationalist sentiments, were committed to their cause, but Christians on the whole were not, and the more importunate the Palestinians became, the wider grew the Muslim-Christian cleavage. Most Christians wanted to keep their country out of the Arab-Israeli dispute. In their view Lebanon's *raison d'être* was to provide a refuge for Christians, distinct and separate from the Islamic Arab hinterland. They feared the Palestinians whom they came to see as dangerous agents of change, threatening their preponderance, trampling on Lebanese sovereignty, encouraging malcontents to wage class warfare, and above all dragging neutral Lebanon into conflict with Israel.

The Christian front-runner was Pierre Jumayil's Kata'ib (or Phalanges) Party, the oldest, best organized and best armed of the Maronite vigilante groups and increasingly seen by Christian opinion as the only effective champion of 'Christian Lebanon'. Ranged against it was the 'National Movement', a motley collection of radical parties and private armies which came together in 1973 under the banner of Kamal Junblatt, an intriguing figure, part Gandhian socialist, part ambitious politician, part feudal Druze chieftain. His National Movement fronted for the Palestinian militias without whose strength he could not have challenged the Maronites. As battle lines were drawn, most of the country's politicians took sides. President Sulayman Franjiya and ex-President Kamil Sham'un, both with strong-arm gangs of their own, fell in behind the Kata'ib, while leading Sunni politicians like Rashid Karami of Tripoli and Sa'ib Salam of Beirut became spokesmen for the Palestinian cause.

The Palestinians were not the only source of tension in Lebanon. From the birth of the republic Muslims and Christians differed on the political culture to which they felt they belonged, the former tending to identify with the Arab world and the latter with the West. Within both Christian and Muslim camps were further fissures and antagonisms: Lebanon was, after all, a patchwork of clans, creeds and ethnic groups living in uneasy balance, a state of affairs recognized in the elaborate sharing out of public offices and perks on the basis of sectarian identity. The most striking features of the Lebanese system were first the enduring political influence of a handful of notables, then the sectarian schisms, and finally the control of economic life by a network

of trading and banking families more concerned with profit than with public good. These arrangements were a recipe for nepotism and resistance to reform. As a result, Muslims came to resent the Christians' built-in privileges and to press for change. Druzes and Shi'a in particular grew disgruntled with a political system founded in essence on a pact between Maronites and Sunnis, which relegated them to lesser status. The underdogs and the poor of all sects began to challenge the fat living of the rich, whether Christian or Muslim. The most potent development was the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of Shi'a, victims of government neglect, Israeli bombing and Palestinian high-handedness, by the remarkable Iranian-Lebanese cleric, the Imam Musa al-Sadr, whose Movement of the Disinherited was founded in 1974 and its military wing, Amal (Hope), in 1975.

Other forces competed for the backing of the underprivileged as well as of all those dissatisfied with the closed, often corrupt circle of the establishment. In the Lebanese free-for-all, in which fifty daily newspapers were published among countless other periodicals, raucous extra-parliamentary pressure groups flourished, importing into the country the various currents and quarrels of the wider Arab world. Communists, Socialists, Ba'thists, Nasserists, pan-Syrians, and rival sub-sects of each, campaigned against each other and against Lebanon's unreformed political machine. So fragmented a society laid itself open to penetration and manipulation by agents from the surrounding countries and beyond. In this 'centre' of the Arab world, where money, ideologies and politics were traded, tussles for influence raged between Israel and its neighbours; between Syria and its Arab opponents, Egypt and Iraq; between Britain and France; between France and the United States; and between the Soviet Union and the West, to the great disturbance of the local scene.

The system might have survived such indigenous and imported stresses, however, had it not been for the added disruption of the Palestine problem. It had been clear from the Six Day War of 1967 when Israel took over the whole of former Palestine, that Lebanon could enjoy no stability in the absence of a political settlement for those who had been dispossessed. Unsatisfied Palestinian frustrations could not but overturn the unsteady Lebanese equilibrium. It was not by chance that the long rumbling tensions erupted into civil war in 1975. Serious disturbances broke out in the spring, precisely at the time when Secretary of State Kissinger started his Sinai Two shuttle, and the conflagration raged out of control in the autumn just as Egypt and Israel concluded their agreement. The Lebanese civil war ran parallel with Kissinger's Middle East diplomacy and can be seen as the gravest of the regional conflicts provoked by his step-by-step advance to Arab disunity.

For when it became clear that Kissinger's objective was not a comprehensive settlement but merely to take Egypt out of play, two powerful currents of alarm and frustration were released in Lebanon. The Christians felt that they would never be quit of the hated and hostile Palestinians, while the Palestinians, deserted by the most powerful Arab state, trembled for their future. It was this insecurity which drove both sides to war. On a flying visit during his early shuttles, Kissinger met Lebanese politicians who pleaded with him to save their country by doing something for the refugees.[3] But he did nothing. After ten years of mounting fear Lebanon in the mid-1970s could have been saved only by a comprehensive Middle East settlement in which the Palestinians were accommodated. Such was the devout hope of Lebanese of all complexions, of neighbouring Arab states and of the mass of Palestinians. But Kissinger and Israel decided otherwise. Sinai Two gave Lebanon its *coup de grâce*.

Israeli reprisals

Israel's part in the tragedy predated Kissinger's. It had long been Israel's policy to make its neighbours pay heavily for Palestinian raids from their territory. Massive retaliation was designed to oblige host governments to control the guerrillas, and on most fronts it worked. But when the Palestinians started operating out of southern Lebanon in 1968, the puny Lebanese army was too weak to bottle them up. Its attempts to do so resulted in clashes which themselves sharpened Lebanon's tensions, sparking off a violent internal debate about the role of the army: should it protect the guerrillas from Israeli strikes (as Arab nationalists demanded) or punish the Palestinians (as the Maronites preferred)?

As it happened, Palestinian attacks on northern Israel from Lebanon were small-scale and ineffective between the 1967 and 1973 wars, largely limited to cross-border sorties into the occupied Golan Heights. But Israel hit the hapless Lebanese in response to Palestinian operations anywhere in the world, or sometimes simply because Lebanon gave the guerrillas house-room. The aim of Israeli retaliation went beyond punishing or deterring the Palestinian enemy: it was evidently designed to provoke dissension inside Lebanon.[4]

For example, when an Israeli airliner was attacked at Athens airport in December 1968 by guerrillas of George Habash's PFLP, Israeli

commandos raided Beirut airport and blew up thirteen Lebanese airliners, sparking off a cycle of strikes, demonstrations, and the fall of the government. Israeli attacks against southern Lebanon became particularly brutal following the influx of Palestinians from Jordan in 1970–71. There were several large-scale armoured sweeps through villages, in which houses were bulldozed, prisoners taken, and resisters shot. The increasing use of Israeli air power made parts of the south uninhabitable and accelerated the flight of Shi'i peasantry to slums around Beirut where inevitably they upset the community balance and were soon to change the character of the capital altogether. Following the brutal murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic Games in 1972, a two-day Israeli rampage along Lebanon's Mediterranean coast dynamited bridges, flattened scores of houses and left a trail of death and devastation in sixteen villages.

These attacks set the Lebanese against each other as well as Christians against the guerrillas. The Palestinian presence gave Israel a mechanism with which to provoke violent confrontations between Maronites and Palestinians, and a handle over Arab peace in general. On the night of 9–10 April 1973 Israeli commandos raided central Beirut and murdered three Fatah leaders in their beds, immediately precipitating huge anti-government demonstrations, a clash between the Muslim prime minister Sa'ib Salam and the Maronite president Sulayman Franjiya, and more than two weeks of fierce fighting between the Lebanese army and Palestinian militias.

When in the spring of 1974 groups of Palestinians started striking into Israel proper, Israeli reprisals duly escalated, with further damage to the fabric of Lebanon. On 15 May, in an attempt to secure the release of some of their fighters held in Israeli jails, Palestinian guerrillas took hostage a schoolroom of children in the Israeli border town of Maalot. The unit responsible called itself 'Kamal Nasser' after one of the Fatah leaders assassinated by Israel in Beirut in April 1973. When Israel refused to trade and stormed the building, sixteen children were killed in the crossfire before the guerrillas themselves were killed. The Maalot killings triggered off several days of ferocious, widespread and systematic Israeli attacks by aircraft, gunboats and ground forces against Palestinian camps and Lebanese villages, in which whole settlements were flattened and between 300 and 400 people killed and wounded.

These violent events took place when Kissinger was in the Middle East, in fact at the height of his Syrian shuttle. He asked Asad for his reaction to Maalot. 'Asad was icily aloof', Kissinger wrote later. 'Why wouldn't Israel give up twenty prisoners and save its children?' he inquired,[5] but even then Asad was worried that Israeli retaliation against Lebanon might sooner or later suck Syria in.

In all, there were some forty-four major Israeli attacks on Lebanon between mid-1968 and mid-1974, resulting in the deaths of about 880 Lebanese and Palestinian civilians.[6] But beyond these casualties and the material damage, the attacks undermined the coherence of Lebanese society and tore the country apart. From 1973 onwards both sides of the Lebanese divide, sensing that they faced physical annihilation, stepped up their efforts to arm themselves and scrambled for allies.

As the fighting in Lebanon spread in tandem with the final phase of Kissinger's diplomacy, Asad became convinced that the conflict was being manipulated from outside. In his analysis, the Lebanese civil war had been fanned into flame to distract the Arab world from what Kissinger was cooking up between Egypt and Israel: it was a cover for Sinai Two, drowning it in blood. Secondly, he saw it as a plot to draw the Palestinian Resistance into war in order to destroy it. And thirdly, he believed the goal was to partition Lebanon, the 'old Zionist aim', as he put it.[7] If the Christians were driven by Palestinian and Muslim pressure to set up a sectarian statelet of their own, Arab nationalism as a bond between Arabs would be discredited, Islam would be made to seem intolerant, the Palestinian programme for a 'secular democratic state' embracing Muslims, Christians and Jews would appear hollow, and Israel would reign supreme over a balkanized Levant.

Asad was obsessed by the precedent of the Jordan crisis of 1970. 'Black September' had blooded him when he was on the very threshold of power, and there too Palestinian militias had challenged the state. He had intervened half-heartedly to try to protect the guerrillas, but had balked at outright war with Jordan and withdrawn his troops within days. Yet even his ineffectual show of force had at the time been enough to give Israel the chance to threaten intervention and thereafter, as Husayn's protector, to extend its influence over Jordan and manoeuvre the king into a covert, equivocal relationship. Was the Jordan nightmare to be repeated in Lebanon, allowing Israel to spread its tentacles up Syria's western flank?

In Asad's view, Syria and Israel were engaged in a contest for the Levant as a whole. Just as they jousted over Lebanon, so they were also engaged in a struggle for Jordan, with Asad endeavouring to bind the king to him and Israel trying to prise him away. As Syrian-Jordanian ties grew closer, Israel's Prime Minister Rabin warned the king in February 1976 to beware of the 'Syrian bear'.[8] Syria was 'playing with fire', he declared, in attempting to build an eastern front.[9] And on the day in March when Husayn called on Asad in Damascus, Moshe

Dayan tried to throw a spanner in the works by revealing Husayn's many secret talks with Israeli leaders since the Six Day War.[10] Right across the Levant chessboard Syria and Israel were jockeying for position.

Asad was by this time persuaded that Israel and the United States were acting in collusion, concerting their diplomatic strategies at the United Nations and elsewhere, as well as their covert operations on the ground in Jordan and Lebanon where he suspected them of inciting the Christians against the Palestinians. Whenever a laboriously negotiated ceasefire seemed to be holding, some outrage would set the place ablaze again, discharging a fresh spate of tit-for-tat kidnappings or killings, as if *agents-provocateurs* were determined to fuel the spiral of violence. He knew that Israel, whose alliance with the Maronites became public in 1976, had a strong intelligence presence in Lebanon, while American agencies were not absent. A former employee of the US National Security Agency was one American official to allege that the Athens station of the CIA had been used to activate the Kata'ib and 'kindle the war'.[11]

Asad felt his environment bristling with perils. He could not allow the Lebanese crisis to rot. If necessary, he would have to intervene and he felt no qualms about doing so. His gut conviction was that Syria's concern with Lebanon was in the very nature of things, whereas interference by Israel, a state alien to the region, could only be illegitimate and malign. Of one thing Asad was certain: if the American-Israeli 'conspiracy' against him was to be thwarted, the fighting in Lebanon had to be stopped. The longer it continued, the greater Israel's opportunities. In his mind it was as clear as a mathematical formula.[12]

The violence grows

From December 1975 onwards a number of developments in Lebanon caused Asad extreme alarm. As the violence grew he envisaged two possible outcomes, both equally horrendous: either the Maronites would set up a separate state, which would bring Israel in as its protector, or the radicals with Palestinian backing would beat the Maronites, which would bring Israel in as punisher. If Syria intervened, it faced defeat; if it remained on the sidelines, Lebanon would fall to the enemy.

Abductions, random killings and other acts of savagery had already become depressingly familiar, but the massacre on 'Black Saturday', 6 December 1975, of some 200 Muslim civilians, rounded up and

butchered in Beirut by Christian militiamen simply because of their religion, touched new depths of barbarism which seemed to rule out any hope of reconciliation. The massacre and the revenge killings that followed stampeded populations back and forth to the security of their co-religionaries, as whole neighbourhoods in hostile territory were blotted out. Each side took further cruel and decisive action in January to 'clean' its patch of alien elements and secure its lines. The Christians overran and razed the Shi'i slum of Karantina in Beirut's port area and the nearby Palestinian camp of Dbaya, because they lay astride roads from Christian East Beirut to the Christian heartlands in the mountains. At the same time the National Movement and its Palestinian allies overwhelmed and ravaged the Christian localities of Damur, Jiyah and Kamil Sham'un's fief of Sa'diyat lying astride the roads linking Muslim West Beirut to the south. Partition was becoming a reality.

To head off a Lebanese collapse, Asad had tried to persuade the warring camps to agree on reforms. In February he encouraged President Franjiya to issue a Constitutional Document giving the Muslims some of the key concessions they had campaigned for: equal parliamentary representation with the Christians; more powers for the Sunni prime minister who was to be chosen by parliament rather than by the Maronite president and whose signature would be required on all decrees and laws; equal access to top civil service posts; and a reference to Lebanon as 'an Arab country'. A year or two earlier these adjustments might have kept the peace, but in the charnel-house which Lebanon had become by the spring of 1976 they were woefully inadequate.

In March 1976 came the knockout blow to the Lebanese state: the disintegration of the army into its religious components, with mutinies by Muslim officers in favour of the left while Christian officers flocked to the Kata'ib. Then, with support from the mutineers, the radicals went on the offensive: they drove Christian forces out of downtown Beirut and bombarded the presidential palace, sending Franjiya fleeing for his life. They began moving against the Christian mountain, herding the Maronites back into a 'Little Lebanon' with the port of Junieh as its main centre.

Asad's dilemma in the spring of 1976 was that those in Lebanon most intent on pursuing the fight were his presumed friends and protégés – Kamal Junblatt's radicals and the Palestinians. So worried was he that in mid-March 1976 he cancelled at short notice a state visit he was due to make to France, his first ever as Syrian president to a Western country.

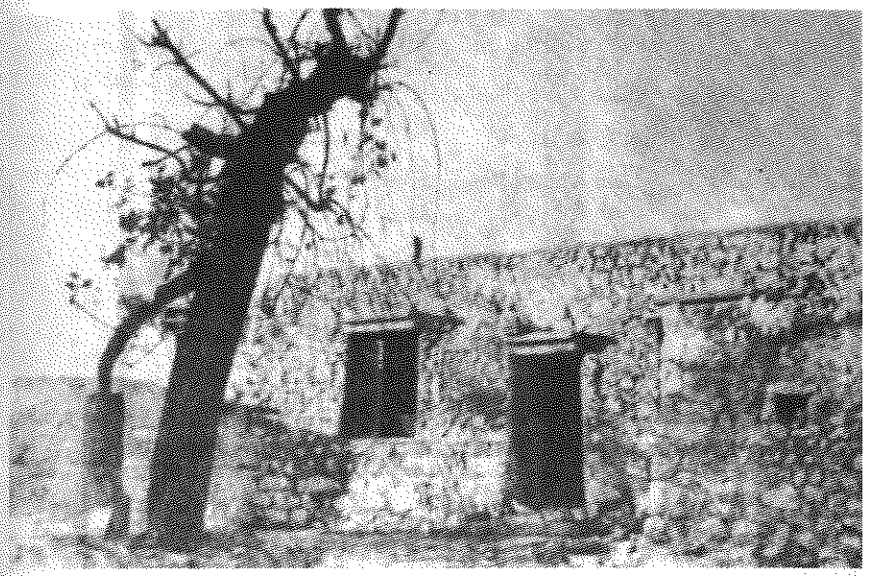
The red-line agreement

The Lebanese crisis was Henry Kissinger's swansong, the last occasion on which he exercised his manipulative skills in the Middle East before President Carter's election removed him from office. As the civil war grew more menacing in the spring of 1976, Kissinger's concern was how to break the tidal wave of radicals and Palestinians which was carrying all before it. He had until then been largely indifferent to the Lebanese predicament, but the victories of the left could no longer be ignored. The Soviet Union which was backing the winning side looked like gaining valuable ground. A more immediate worry was what Syria and Israel would do. Both saw Lebanon as crucial to their security, but, if they clashed, a new Middle East war might be the consequence, putting at risk Kissinger's achievements and in particular the Israel-Egypt relationship.

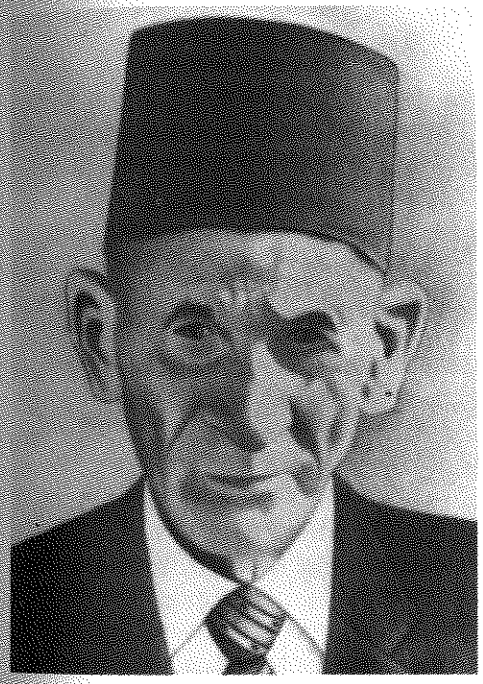
For Kissinger, as indeed for Asad and Rabin, events in Lebanon seemed a replay of the Jordan crisis of 1970. Then Asad had sent in his armour until forced out by the spectre of an Israeli strike. Was not this the model for Lebanon in 1976? Once again the Palestinians were at war, and once again Israel was flexing its muscles to keep Syria out. Israeli warnings had been conveyed to Syria through the United States whose ambassador in Damascus, Richard Murphy, told Asad that Israel would view any Syrian entry into Lebanon as 'a very grave threat' to itself. Murphy's ultimatum – do not intervene, or Israel will[13] – was given added force by his caution that the United States might not be able to hold Israel back. It was a classic expression of Israel's traditional position that the presence of other Arab troops in either Lebanon or Jordan would be considered a *casus belli*.

Then Henry Kissinger had a cleverer idea. It may have dawned on him when he went to the airport in Washington on 29 March 1976 to greet King Husayn of Jordan. The two men shared many secrets from the 1970 crisis. In the receiving line at the airport the king and Kissinger came upon L. Dean Brown, the former US ambassador to Amman who had been their go-between in the critical days of Black September. It was perhaps this chance encounter as well as his conversations with Husayn at this time which planted the seed of a characteristically byzantine scheme in Kissinger's fertile mind. Within twenty-four hours he brought Dean Brown out of retirement and sent him on a special mission to Beirut.

Until that moment, the received wisdom in both Washington and Jerusalem was to scare Asad into keeping out of Lebanon as Christians



1. Hafiz al-Asad was born in 1930 i this rough-hewn village house in th 'Alawi mountains where he grew up From an early age Asad attempted t transcend his sectarian 'Alawi backgroun



2. Asad's father, 'Ali Sulayman, a peasant who rose to become a minor notable, and his strong-minded mother Na'isa.

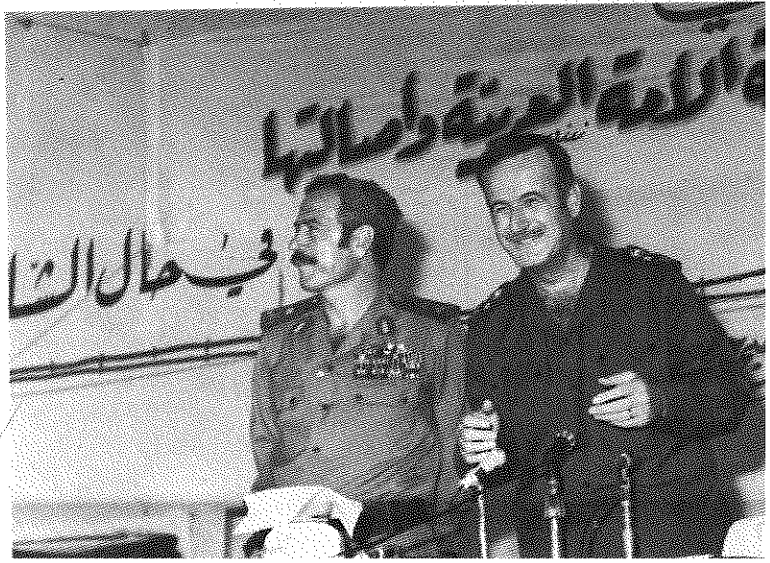
3. Asad won a cup for aerobatics and dreamed of politics while he was at the Aleppo Flying School in the early 1950s.

4. As a disgruntled Air Force officer in Cairo in 1960-61 Asad founded a secret Military Committee which became the

5. (top) Asad became Defence Minister in 1966. He was eventually to topple Dr Nur al-Din Atasi, the Head of State, with whom he is pictured here.

6. (centre) Crowds turned out in Damascus to acclaim the new leader after the 'Corrective Movement' of November 1970, Asad's coup which finally brought stability to the Syrian leadership.

7. (bottom) Asad's friendship with his long-serving Defence Minister, the Sunni officer Mustafa Tlas, was typical of his concern to forge alliances across the Sunni-'Alawi divide in Syria.



8. Asad's great military gamble turned sour during the 1973 War, as Israeli guns pounded Syrian positions on the Golan Heights, which the Syrians were forced to abandon. (Christian Simonpietri/Sygma.)

9. The mood at the Arab Summit in Algiers in November 1973 was grim when Asad and Foreign Minister Khaddam gathered with other Arab leaders to take stock after the October War. (Michel Laurent.)

10. Immediately after the October War Kissinger was in Cairo to woo Sadat into a separate peace with Israel. (Sobi/Sygma.)

11. Asad's faith in evenhanded American mediation led him to welcome President Nixon and Henry Kissinger to Damascus on 16 June 1974 when diplomatic relations with the US were resumed. (Azad.)

12. The two important women in Asad's life have been his wife, Aniseh, and his daughter, Bushra, pictured here in June 1974. Asad has tried to maintain the privacy of his wife and children, away from the glare of publicity. (Alexandra de Borchgrave.)

13. (left) Kissinger's public relations gestures disguised his lack of sympathy for Arab aspirations in their struggle with Israel. (Claude Salhani/Sygma.)

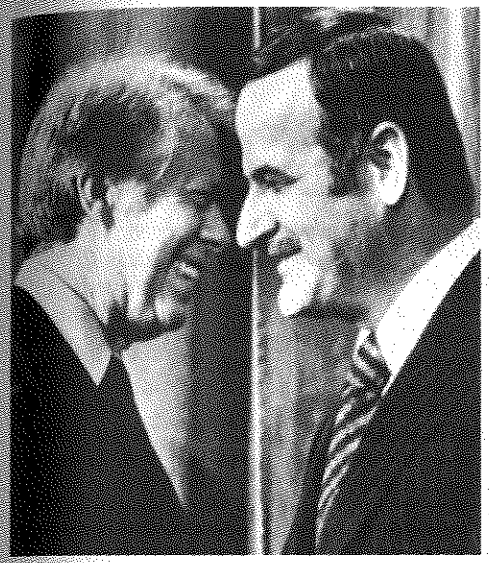
14. (right) A guiding principle of Kissinger's Middle East diplomacy was close policy coordination with Israel, whose Prime Minister, Golda Meir, he held in special esteem. (Henri Bureau.)

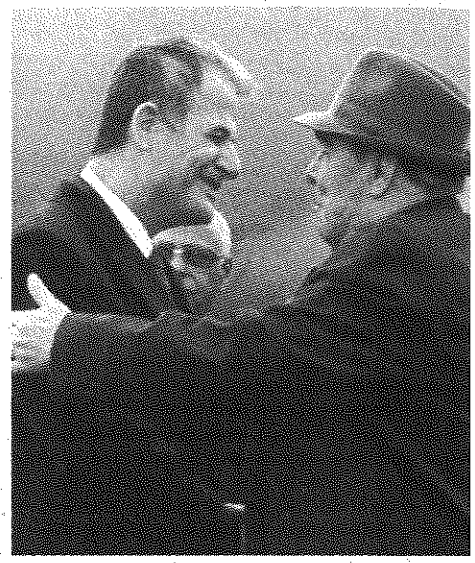
15. (top left) Meeting President Carter in Geneva on 9 May 1977, Asad's hopes in American diplomacy revived. (Wide World Photos.)

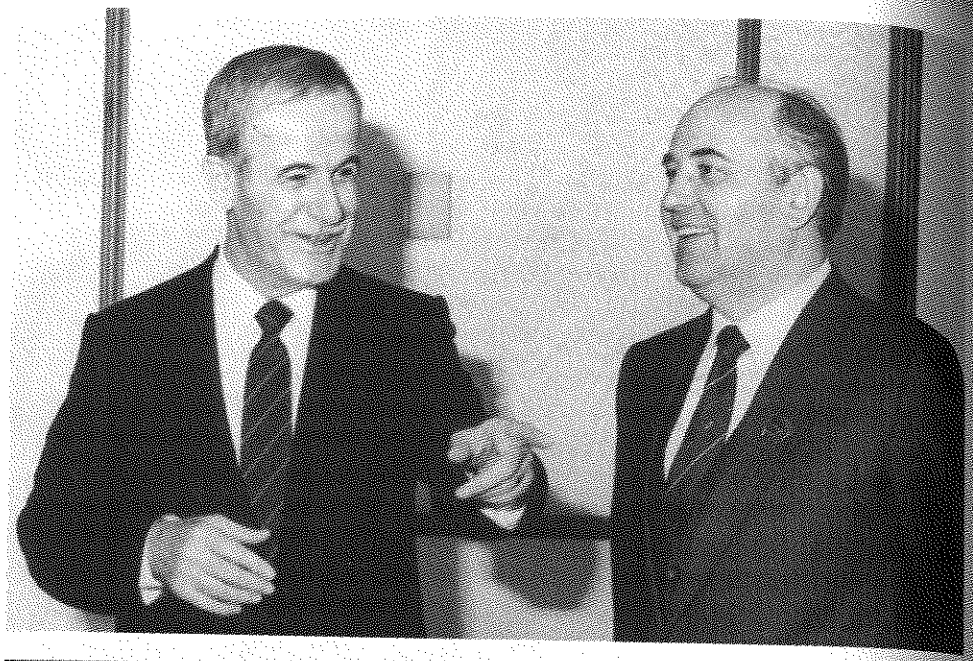
16. (top right) Hardpressed by his enemies, Asad turned for help to Moscow in October 1980 and signed a Treaty of Friendship with General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev. (SANA.)

17. (bottom left) A pugnacious Menachem Begin came to Washington to defend Israeli policies to his worried ally Ronald Reagan two weeks after Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. US-Israeli relations seemed to be spinning out of control. (Jean-Louis Atlan/Sygma.)

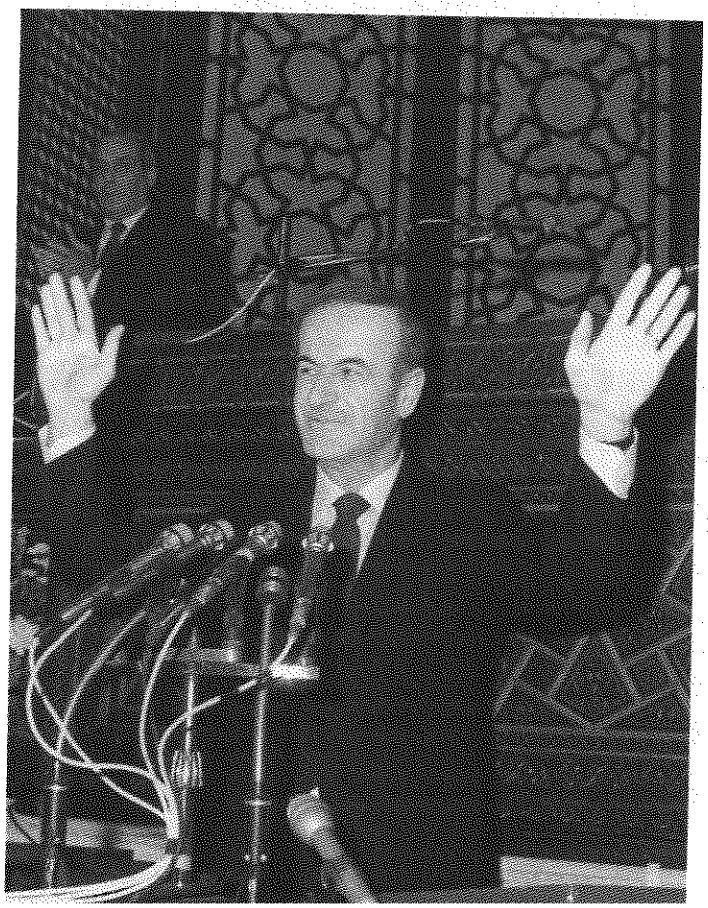
18. (bottom right) Yasser Arafat and King Husayn, adversary-partners, whom Asad struggled to control, made a vain attempt in April 1983 to sink their own differences. (A. de Wildenberg/Sygma.)







19. Worried by Soviet-American detente, Asad visited Moscow in 1987 to press Gorbachev not to waver in his support of Syria.



20. By 1988, Asad, already the master of Syria, had striven to establish himself as the Arab world's domi-

and Palestinians battled it out. This was Israel's instinct and to begin with it was Kissinger's too. His brainwave was to turn the received wisdom on its head. Surely the right policy was not to scare Asad off the scene, but rather to scare him on to it? Instead of saying to him, 'If you go in, so will Israel', the shrewder message was, 'If you *don't* go in, Israel certainly will'.

Kissinger was not feeling well-disposed towards the Syrian leader: his initial appreciation had long since given way to something cooler as Asad proved the sharpest and most obstructive critic of his diplomacy. He was aware that Asad's overriding fear was of an Israeli intervention in Lebanon to save the Christians, a fear which was causing him to attempt to restrain Junblatt and 'Arafat from pressing the Christians too hard. Kissinger grasped that Asad's anxieties could be turned to advantage: instead of protecting the Palestinians, Asad might be induced to crush them in order to prevent them from triggering off what he most feared – an Israeli invasion.

The benefits for the United States and Israel could be great indeed: the Palestinians would be humbled, the left reined in, Moscow thwarted, and Asad himself tarnished by a deed heinous in Arab eyes. How much of this Kissinger worked out and how much was just 'feel' must be a matter of speculation.

To ensure the desired outcome required the pulling of a few strings. Syria had to be told that the United States would not disapprove of an intervention in Lebanon and that Israel would not contest it by force; Israel in turn had to be persuaded – against its natural instinct – to accept the entry of a Syrian army into Lebanon; and in Lebanon itself the fighting between Christians and Palestinians would have to be kept going because if it stopped Syria would have no further cause to intervene.

Israel was not easily convinced of the wisdom of letting Syrian troops in, seeing that it was an axiom of Israel's policy that Syria had to be contained, not encouraged to expand. But on this occasion too Kissinger was able to argue that he knew best what was good for Israel. He won unexpected support from Chief of Staff Mordechai Gur and chief of Military Intelligence Shlomo Gazit, who both asserted that the entry of Syrian forces into Lebanon would actually weaken the Syrian army and divert its attention from the Golan Heights. Rabin was eventually converted.

Everything was in place for the secret US-Syrian-Israeli understanding which came to be known as the 'red-line' agreement – an unwritten, unsigned and by the Syrians unavowed accord whereby Israel agreed to the entry of Syrian troops into parts of Lebanon.[14] The Israelis hedged

their acceptance by insisting that Syrian troops south of the Damascus-Beirut road could not exceed one brigade and could not bring in SAMs. Israel also insisted on limiting Syrian air and naval deployment. This interpretation of the 'red-line' agreement was contained in a letter from Israel's then Foreign Minister Yigal Allon to Kissinger, the terms of which he passed on to Damascus.[15] But, these restrictions apart, the fact remained that the red-line agreement was an invitation to Syria to come in, not a warning to it to stay out. Syria could now move against the Palestinians in Lebanon with the assurance that Israel would not interfere.

The turnabout was heralded by a dramatic change of tune from Washington. Right up to the end of March the State Department publicly warned Damascus against intervention, but suddenly thereafter the White House, Kissinger himself, L. Dean Brown and the Damascus embassy started issuing expressions of approval for Syria's 'constructive' role. Never did red light change more rapidly to green.

L. Dean Brown, Kissinger's envoy, handled the Lebanese end of the affair. Visiting Junblatt in his castle of Mukhtara, he expressed gloom about the future of co-existence between Druzes and Maronites which Junblatt took to mean American sanction for partition – and therefore for a continuation of the war.[16] To the three principal Christian leaders, Franjiya, Jumayil and Sham'un, holed up in their mountain fortresses, Brown made plain that they could not expect rescue from the Marines as in 1958, but that their salvation lay in strengthening themselves through closer ties with Israel.[17] Thus the Lebanese war machine was primed.

Threats from Junblatt and 'Arafat

In 1976 Asad felt compelled to intervene militarily in the civil war. His move was not impulsive. It had been long pondered and debated within the Ba'th party leadership. The writing had been on the wall for months. As early as December 1975 Asad had sent into Lebanon units of the Palestine Liberation Army and of Sa'iqa to rein in the radical alliance and separate the combatants. He had warned bluntly that Syria would strike at anyone who broke the peace, but his words had gone unheeded.

On 27 March 1976 he had a stormy seven-hour meeting with Kamal Junblatt, the uncontested leader of the Lebanese left. Junblatt had just announced the formation of a 'Fakhreddin Army' (named after a seventeenth century Druze hero) to unite all Muslim and leftist forces

and wage 'total and irreversible' war on the Christian forces.[18] But to Asad Junblatt's war policy seemed utter folly, playing straight into Israel's hands and exposing Syria itself to untold peril. 'Why are you escalating the fighting?' he asked. 'The reforms in the Constitutional Document give you 95 per cent of what you want. What else are you after?' Junblatt replied that he wanted to get rid of the Christians 'who have been on top of us for 140 years'. The problem was that, as a Druze, Junblatt was constitutionally debarred from the presidency which was reserved for Maronites alone. To rule Lebanon as he aspired to do, he had to smash the confessional system, but smashing the system meant smashing the Christians or at least subjugating them. In spite of his inherited position as a Druze baron, Junblatt was a genuine man of the left. Since the founding of his Progressive Socialist Party in 1949, he had campaigned for reform, coming to stand as a champion of the have-nots of Lebanese society. He had early befriended the Palestinians, proclaimed himself a Nasserist, enjoyed cordial relations with Moscow, and from the late 1960s onwards had gathered together a vast constituency of Arab nationalists and radicals of all sorts. And by the spring of 1976, as his allies besieged the strongholds of his old Maronite rivals, he scented victory.[19]

But Asad was filled with horror at the prospect of a radical, adventurist Lebanon on his flank, provoking Israel and alarming the West by giving free rein to Palestinian militants. And this was precisely where Junblatt's ambition was leading. For if Junblatt could not seize the whole of Lebanon, he evidently had his eye on the 'leftist' half – the south, the Shuf, Sidon and West Beirut – where he saw himself running a sort of Mediterranean Cuba which he imagined Soviet support would make invulnerable.[20] The steering committee of his National Movement was already posing as the cabinet of this future 'people's republic', with as its 'prime minister' a radical Shi'i pamphleteer, Muhsin Ibrahim, who had travelled from MAN to Marxism. Asad had little taste for the upheaval Junblatt was seeking to bring about. He was not averse to reform in Lebanon: he had in fact inspired Franjiya's Constitutional Document and when that failed had forced through the premature election of Ilyas Sarkis in the hope that a new untarnished leader would stabilize the situation. But he was a man of order and he did not want the Maronite establishment deposed.

Junblatt stormed out of the meeting with Asad totally unpersuaded of the need to stop his war. Returning to Beirut, his attacks on Syria and its leader became more strident and, to Asad's dismay, his commitment to battle still more wholehearted. In Asad's view Junblatt's ambition blinded him to the big picture, but he held the

Palestinian leaders still more culpable as their troops alone made Junblatt's warlike strategy credible. 'Arafat, Abu Iyad, George Habash and the others had evidently not learned the lesson of their disastrous confrontation with King Husayn in 1970.

Asad's relations with the Palestinian Resistance had long been highly ambivalent: in theory he was with it heart and soul, in practice it was a constant source of trouble. A passionate advocate of the Palestine cause, Asad could claim that no Arab leader had fought for it more consistently or had more firmly linked his own future to the recovery of Palestinian rights. First to arm the guerrillas in the 1960s, Syria had been the only Arab state to attempt to protect them against King Husayn in 1970. In 1971, when Husayn was finishing them off in the wilds of northern Jordan, Asad had sent Mustafa Tlas to negotiate a deal which would have given the militias sanctuaries overlooking the Jordan valley but, obsessed by hatred of the king, the Fatah leadership had shortsightedly refused to compromise, making the move to Lebanon inevitable. In 1971–3 Syria had housed the fighters and kept them supplied as they took over the hill country of 'Arqub – their 'Fatahland'. From 1972 Syrian anti-aircraft gunners had even been posted secretly to Palestinian camps in Lebanon to protect them against Israeli air attack. Again in April-May 1973, when the Palestinians were fighting the Lebanese army, Asad had sent Syrian commandos to their aid and closed the frontier with Lebanon in their support. Asad was even to claim later that the thirteen Syrian planes shot down by Israel on the eve of the October War had been defending Palestinians in the 'Arqub.[21]

But when all was said and done, Asad had no confidence in the guerrillas, and considered their operations a dangerous nuisance in that, for trifling results, they allowed Israel to mobilize international sympathy and exposed Arab states to attack. Asad would not prevent anyone going off to fight Israel if they wished to do so, but in Syria at least any such operation had to be firmly controlled and subordinated to national policy.

The war in Lebanon brought to the surface the essential irreconcilability of the interests of the Arab states and those of the guerrillas. The Palestinians yearned for freedom to decide their own strategies, but such independence could be had only at the expense of the security of Arab states. In 1975–6 Asad woke up to the fact that the Palestinians held the key to Lebanon's sovereignty: the power of decision over peace and war. This was the crux of his conflict with them.[22]

'Arafat came three times to Damascus that spring, in March, April and May but, just as Asad's encounter with Junblatt had been a

dialogue of the deaf, so his encounters with 'Arafat simply widened the chasm between them. The cautious Syrian leader, a strategist with an iron grasp of the possible, wrestled with the mercurial Palestinian whose temperament inclined him to the taking of impossible risks. Asad warned 'Arafat to keep out of the war. Disturbance in Lebanon was not in the interests of the Resistance. There could be no possible connection, he argued, between fighting the Christians in the Lebanese mountains and recovering Palestine. In a major speech on 12 April he declared:[23]

> We are against those who insist on continuing the fighting. A great conspiracy is being hatched against the Arab nation . . . Our brothers in the Palestinian leadership must understand and be aware of the gravity of this conspiracy. They are the prime targets.

But 'Arafat dreamed of autonomy for his movement free from Arab tutelage. Both Iraq and Egypt were pressing him to resist Asad's influence. Half the Lebanese population was on his side, leading him to believe that his position there was both legitimate and unassailable. He would not be dictated to by Syria. Just as Junblatt yearned to rule Lebanon, so 'Arafat saw a leftist Lebanon in which he held the real power as the best haven and the most effective springboard for his homeless people. So he made the fateful decision to continue the war against the Christians. It was to be a war against Syria.

Syrian intervention

Asad sent an army into Lebanon to teach the Palestinians sense and to keep the Christians Arab. On the night of 31 May to 1 June 1976 Syrian armoured columns crossed the border in strength and immediately broke the Palestinian and leftist siege on several Christian settlements, notably the important town of Zahla in the Biqa' valley. Once reasoning, persuasion and threats had failed Asad felt he had no choice. This was his first major use of force since the October War, but whereas that campaign had expressed the deepest Arab yearnings and won him enthusiastic applause, his Lebanon action was widely misunderstood, was shot through with mixed motives and unnatural alliances, and proved profoundly unpopular. It was an altogether awkward and thankless venture which was to cost Asad friends abroad and generate at home one of the worst crises of his presidency.

At first his intervention was low-key, even tentative, each advance

preceded by calls on the Palestinians and their allies to lay down their arms and withdraw from Christian areas. Asad was clearly anxious to avoid large-scale clashes or casualties to either side. As in Jordan in 1970, his tanks were given no air cover. But when the Palestinian command rejected his ultimatums, Asad brought in artillery and aircraft in support of thrusts deeper into Lebanon. Sharp engagements were fought along the Damascus-Beirut highway, in and around the southern port of Sidon, in Fatahland, in the foothills of Mount Hermon, and around the northern port of Tripoli. By late June Syrian forces were blockading Palestinian and leftist strongpoints and supply lines by land and sea and controlled some two-thirds of the country, although not the populated coastal strip.

The battle in the Sidon area was to be of traumatic significance. Not expecting to meet resistance, a Syrian tank unit ran into a Palestinian ambush in which at least two tanks were destroyed and four others captured. Some Syrian officers and crews were killed. Rumours spread that they had been beheaded and their heads kicked about like footballs, although this was almost certainly untrue. Reports also reached Asad that Syrian soldiers who had been manning anti-aircraft guns in Palestinian camps had been beaten up and in some cases killed. He was outraged by these incidents and his heart hardened against the Palestinians. The fools were digging their own graves by sucking him deeper into a conflict he longed to avoid. With all the indignation of a man convinced of his own rectitude, he wrote off the Palestinian leaders not just as reckless adventurers but as thankless wretches who bit the hand that fed them. The extraordinary personal animus between Asad and 'Arafat probably dates from the Sidon ambush.[24]

Syria's intervention turned the tide of the civil war, throwing the Palestinians and leftists on the defensive and allowing the Christians to move to the attack against hostile enclaves in their territory, and in particular against the great sprawling camp of Tal al-Za'tar in Beirut's eastern suburbs to which they now laid siege. After a fifty-two-day blockade of savage intensity, this slum, inhabited by some 30,000 Palestinian and Shi'i refugees, fell to Christian forces on 12 August. About 3,000 civilians died, many of them slaughtered after the camp had fallen to Kamil Sham'un's private army, the so-called 'Tigers', commanded by his son Dany.

The merciless carnage at Tal al-Za'tar was the first of many massacres of Palestinian civilians by other Arabs, prefiguring the Sabra and Shatila killings of 1982 perpetrated by Christian militiamen with Israeli encouragement, and the 'war of the camps' of 1986–7, in which

the Palestinians' tormentors were Shi'a allied to Syria. But by illustrating the switch in Syria's friendships, Tal al-Za'tar dug a trench of hatred and suspicion between Asad and the Palestinians.

Asad's war on the Palestinians and his defence of the Christians were seen as an astonishing, and to many a profoundly shocking, reversal of alliances. The lion of Arabism was slaughtering Arabism's sacred cow. For the rest of his presidency Asad was to bear the burden of a policy which was as unpopular with the Arab masses as it was misunderstood. Israel meanwhile watched him thrashing about in the Lebanese quagmire with undisguised satisfaction. Prime Minister Rabin observed sardonically that he saw no need to disturb the Syrian army in its killing of 'Arafat's terrorists'.[25] Kissinger's calculations had proved correct: his discreet string-pulling had caused Syria, of all countries, to bash Palestinians and dash Soviet hopes.

The outcry against Asad's war in Lebanon was heard from one end of the Arab world to the other. Sadat broke off relations and his foreign minister accused Asad of genocide.[26] Iraq's strong man Saddam Husayn sent troops to the Syrian border, calling Asad a megalomaniac whose mad ambitions had immersed him in a bloodbath of his own making.[27] Junblatt denounced the Syrian government as a fascist military regime, and both he and Palestinian leaders called for all-out war against Damascus. For Asad's military intervention had put an abrupt end to Junblatt's daydreams. And the paradox was that once Asad had robbed him of everything he had struggled for, Junblatt really did revert to being a narrowly vindictive, lord of the Druzes. This normally non-violent man, this Gandhian, became very violent indeed, seeing himself at last as the frustrated instrument of a historic Druze revenge on the Maronites. With his vision of a socialist Lebanon shattered, he seemed to be taken over by the ancient feuds of his ancestors.[28] The now beleaguered National Movement appealed for the despatch of Algerian, Tunisian, Libyan or Iraqi troops, for UN or French intervention, or indeed for help against Syria from any quarter. At the same time Syrian embassies in various countries came under attack from pro-PLO Arab demonstrators. More ominously for Asad, there were persistent reports that the oil states, which had so generously funded Syria's boom after 1973, were now cutting back their subsidies.

In the closed world of Ba'thist politics, another painful shaft was fired at him: Salah al-Din Bitar, co-founder of the party and now in exile in Paris, asked in an article in *Le Monde* how it was that Syria, 'the beating heart of Arabism', could have joined Christian isolationists

on a course so foreign to its traditions. The answer, he said damagingly, lay in the nature of power in Damascus: lonely, cut off from the people, stifling all democracy.[29]

Two other charges, widely circulated at the time, did Asad much harm. The first was that he was acting in collusion with the United States to crush the Palestinians in order to pave the way for an American peace plan. He took this hard, seeing that he had reason to consider himself the main obstacle to, and main victim of, American and Israeli scheming. The second slur was that he was playing minority politics – hastening to the relief of the Maronites because he was himself a minority man. Anti-Syrian demonstrators in Beirut chanted: 'Asad, we can stomach you as an Alawite but not as a Maronite!'[30] Insight into the feelings of threatened minorities was indeed part of Asad's inheritance, but, in all fairness, his Lebanese adventure was motivated by geo-strategic reasons, by the need to head off an Israeli intervention, and not by narrow sectarian sentiments. When still a schoolboy, he had self-consciously climbed out of the minority trap in order to embrace the Arab cause. Now, angrily warning his enemies not to push him too far, he declared that 'nothing embarrasses us in this country. We have gone beyond complexes and have been free for a long time.'[31] It was a personal *cri de coeur*.

Although he put a brave face on it, at home his regime was shaken and there were frequent reports of disturbance and disaffection that summer, amplified by his enemies but real nonetheless. In September three Palestinians were hanged in public for seizing a Damascus hotel and taking hostages. In the face of such violence, Asad felt the need for more protection: a Presidential Guard was set up under his wife's kinsman, 'Adnan Makhluf, while his brother Rif'at was promoted to the rank of full colonel and his Defence Companies, the praetorian guard of the regime, were reinforced.

Among the casualties of Asad's armed foray into Lebanon were good relations with the Soviet Union. The Soviet leadership was alarmed at the turn of events in the spring of 1976 and sent Premier Kosygin to the area, first to Iraq and then to Syria. In Baghdad, where he arrived in late May, Kosygin publicly cautioned Syria against intervention in Lebanon, but by the time he reached Damascus on 1 June it was too late. Asad had overnight thrust his troops and his Russian armour across the border. In spite of Asad's lengthy explanations, the Soviet premier was angry[32] and Tass commented sourly that Syria's intervention had done nothing to staunch the 'ever-swelling river of blood'.[33] The reasons for Soviet displeasure were easy to divine. The Russians admired Junblatt (he was one of only a few

Arabs to be awarded the Lenin Peace Prize); they had close ties with the PLO; loath to have to choose between Asad and the Lebanese left, they were embarrassed to see them fighting each other. Above all, they had expected great political gains in Lebanon, perhaps hoping to turn it into a unique relay station for their regional influence once their friends had triumphed. By destroying these expectations Asad seemed to be putting the clock back to a Western-dominated Lebanon, thereby annulling ten years of hard work by the left.

As the Syrians advanced into Lebanon, Junblatt and the Palestinians waited for the Soviet Union to save them, and Kosygin in Damascus was bombarded with appeals. Some deluded souls even imagined Soviet paratroopers would drop out of the skies. Moscow had indeed told the Lebanese Communist Party and other friends on the left that it disapproved of Syria's intervention, and this was locally misunderstood to mean that Moscow would do something to stop it.[34] In fact, the Kremlin intended not a breach with Syria but merely a cooling of relations. Brezhnev sent a message to Asad urging him to withdraw and Moscow made repeated pleas to all three parties – Syria, the Lebanese left and the Palestinians – to close ranks.

For Asad the practical consequences of Soviet displeasure were severe enough: new arms contracts were postponed and, at a time when Israel seemed particularly threatening, he was largely deprived of a superpower prop. Recalling the crisis a decade later he said with characteristic understatement,[35]

> There was a setback in our relations with the Soviet Union. Certain commitments between us came to an end. It was difficult for them to understand the nature of our relations with Lebanon.

Advanced Soviet weaponry did not again reach Syria until 1978 when, in the wake of Sadat's trip to Jerusalem, Asad was back in favour as the Russians' friend in the Middle East.

The opprobrium heaped upon him from all quarters did not divert Asad from his objectives of removing the Palestinians from the Christian heartlands, separating them from the leftist National Movement, and taming both in the interests of his wider anti-Israeli strategy.

The summer of 1976 was spent in low-level military operations alternating with renewed appeals and ultimatums. Then, in late September and October, Asad launched a number of major offensives which ended in the near-rout of the Palestinians and their allies. He was now ready to accept a Saudi invitation to a peace-making summit

in Riyadh on 16 October which consecrated his Pyrrhic victory. His presence in Lebanon was legitimized. His troops were recognized as the major contingent in a proposed 'Arab Deterrent Force' which Saudi Arabia and Kuwait agreed to fund. The Palestinians were returned to their camps after promises had been extracted from them (and soon broken) to abide by the Cairo Agreement. Asad's venomous quarrels with Sadat and 'Arafat were for the moment papered over, and all this was endorsed at a wider Arab gathering in Cairo on 25 October. In mid-November Syrian troops marched into West Beirut, the leftist private armies vanished from the streets and the civil war was declared over.

But Asad's victory was partial and compromised. From then on he had to bear the burden of having pursued a course which the majority of Arabs saw as profoundly anti-Arab. He defended himself, then and later, eloquently and repeatedly, tracing in public the whole history of his relations with Junblatt and 'Arafat. From first to last Asad remained convinced that, whatever the outside pressures on him, his intervention had been tactically and morally correct and that he had been impelled by the highest principles.[36] He had been forced to act by the blindness and ambition of men who could not grasp the nature of his life-and-death struggle with Israel. But the shadow remained. Whatever his justifications, he was never wholly believed, and in some important way he was seen to have departed from the Arab mainstream.

Israel and the Maronites

The men whose war had forced his intervention continued to plague him, the one in life and the other in death. It was widely believed at the time that Asad not only wished to tame the Palestinian movement but also to depose Yasir 'Arafat and name in his stead Syria's man, Khalid al-Fahum, a Damascus-based former teacher of chemistry who was then chairman of the Palestine National Council. But 'Arafat, both then and in the coming years, proved remarkably resistant to Syrian pressures.

'Arafat's civil war ally, Kamal Junblatt, was assassinated on 16 March 1977 when on his way from his castle, Mukhtara, to B'aqlin, the largest Druze village in the Shuf. His car was intercepted, two men got in, ordered his bodyguards out, and blew off the top of his head before making their getaway. Kamal Junblatt's son, Walid, who succeeded him as head of the Junblatt clan, was one of many to

hold the Syrians responsible. As he later explained: 'My father was badly advised. He was informed that a coup was in preparation in Syria and that by attacking the 'Alawi leadership there he could upset the regime. All he did was sign his death warrant.' Walid Junblatt called on Asad at the end of the forty-day period of mourning for his father. He had to choose between Syria and Israel and, notwithstanding his suspicions of its complicity in his father's murder, he chose Syria. It was nevertheless disconcerting to be greeted by Asad with the words: 'How closely you resemble your father!'[37] Whether or not Asad willed Junblatt's death, he was blamed for it throughout the Arab world and his reputation suffered. There was, however, some benefit to be derived: with Junblatt's disappearance, the anti-Syrian coalition he led fell apart.

Nevertheless, Asad's fundamental objective in Lebanon eluded him. He had fought against the Palestinians and protected the Christians in order to deny Israel a pretext for intervention. But his controversial and costly move proved vain: by the end of 1976 Israel was more deeply involved in Lebanese affairs than ever and was flaunting its intimate relationship with the Maronites to the shock and horror of Arab opinion which for three decades had sought to put the 'Zionist entity' into quarantine. The Christians had accepted Syria's help but to Asad's fury they had also reinsured with Israel. Israeli weapons, advisers and cash flowed into the Maronite heartlands through the port of Junieh while southern Lebanon was restructured to Israel's advantage. As early as July 1976, barely a month after Syria entered Lebanon, Defence Minister Shimon Peres announced the 'good fence programme' whereby the frontier security barriers which Israel had erected in 1974 were opened to traffic, offering Lebanese residents of the border villages employment, medical care and markets for their produce in Israel, and thereby giving Israel a chance to turn them into collaborators against the Palestinians. Israeli armoured patrols now penetrated freely into Lebanon and, by October, a pro-Israeli militia led by Major Sa'd Haddad, a Christian officer of the defunct Lebanese Army, was functioning as Israel's early-warning system along the whole border.[38]

The Christians were thankless, the Druzes bitter, radicals of all shades vengeful, the Palestinians hostile and still in arms, and Israel, now as much part of the Lebanese scene as Syria itself, able to tweak Asad's tail at will. In defence of his strategic environment, Asad had fallen into the Lebanese quagmire.

18

Jimmy Carter's False Dawn

The all-important question for Asad on Jimmy Carter's election to the presidency in November 1976 was whether his Administration would follow in Kissinger's pro-Israeli footsteps or revert to a more balanced Middle East policy. Like much of the world, Asad knew next to nothing about the Southern Baptist peanut farmer who had captured the White House, and had gloomily watched Carter vying with Gerald Ford for the Jewish vote during the campaign. Carter in turn had never met an Arab, except once at a racecourse in Florida.[1] Grown sceptical, Asad was doubtful whether America's bias could be reversed after the thorough job Kissinger had done in robbing the Arabs of the fruits of the October War and giving Israel a decisive edge. But prudently he sent the president-elect a congratulatory telegram in which he called for 'a fair US attitude' towards the Arab-Israeli conflict and spelled out his peace terms. These were the familiar duo: an Israeli withdrawal from Arab territories occupied in 1967 and the restoration of the 'legitimate rights' of the Palestinians.[2]

This formality completed, Asad did not press the point. Like other Arab leaders, he was slow to grasp how radically Carter was proposing to depart from the assumptions and procedures of the Kissinger era, and how much help he would need from the Arabs if he were to succeed. When Carter began to expound his ideas, the Arabs reacted with less excitement than might have been expected. His programme, and especially his concern for the Palestinians, struck them as no more than simple justice. Unlike the Israelis, the Arabs had no experience of intervening in US domestic politics and were inclined to sit back and see what Carter could deliver.

In the light of the US-Israeli intimacy which had grown up since 1967, Carter's programme was revolutionary indeed. Having made human rights a central tenet of his foreign policy, he saw the wrongs done to the Palestinians as somewhat akin to those suffered by the

blacks in the United States which, for moral as well as political reasons, he could not ignore. Steeped in the scriptures from childhood, he revered the lands of the Bible and cherished the ambition to make peace there. He, and even more so his Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, were critical of Kissinger's inclination to see the world in terms of geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union. Discontents existed in the Third World which they perceived to have little or nothing to do with Soviet ambitions. Vance was scathing about the way Kissinger's obsession with the global contest had damaged rather than advanced US interests in places like Angola, where misguided American moves in 1975 had driven the main nationalist movement into Soviet and Cuban arms.[3] In the Middle East, US neglect of Arab concerns, at a time when the rise of OPEC signalled the post-colonial awakening of the developing world, risked opening rather than closing doors to the Russians. It was all very well arming Israel to the teeth as a 'strategic asset' against the Soviet Union, but one had to take on board the frustrations which this policy aroused among Israel's Arab neighbours.

Another influential advocate for a 'constructive US relationship with the Arab world'[4] was Carter's National Security Adviser, Dr Zbigniew Brzezinski, a Polish-born professor of international politics who, just when Kissinger in 1975 was shaping the Middle East to Israel's advantage, was helping draft a set of very different proposals in a celebrated Brookings report.[5] This was a sort of 'counter-Kissinger', in which the traditional concern for Israel's wellbeing was balanced by an awareness of Arab interests.

All this then – the Bible and Brookings, the fear of another war and another energy crisis, a sense that Kissinger had left the peacemaking job half done, pity for the Palestinians under Israeli occupation – promoted the Middle East to the top of Carter's foreign policy priorities. He called boldly for a comprehensive settlement to be negotiated before the end of 1977 at a new session of the Geneva conference at which he envisaged that, in exchange for peace, Israel would withdraw to the 1967 borders with only minor adjustments. Most strikingly of all, he proposed a new deal for the Palestinians – no longer defined as refugees as in Resolution 242 or as terrorists as Israel wanted the world to see them, but as a people deprived of basic rights who needed a homeland of their own. Carter believed the Palestinians had to be involved in the negotiations and hoped that the United States would be able to start talking to the PLO.

Operationally there was also a significant correction of aim. Kissinger's habitual practice had been to reach prior, usually secret, agreement with Israel before facing the Arabs;[6] Carter believed in

consulting closely with Israel but was not prepared to concert with it against its Arab foes.[7] Carter was by no means anti-Israeli but nor did he view the Middle East solely in the perspective of Israeli interests and security. The Arabs also existed, suffered, hoped and feared. After years of ever closer US-Israeli relations, which blossomed under Lyndon Johnson and reached their full flowering with Henry Kissinger, this return to 'even-handedness' amounted to a considerable U-turn.

Not altogether surprisingly, the Israeli leaders were horrified by Carter. Every one of his ideas, save for his declared objective of seeking 'real peace', was anathema to them. He seemed to be tearing up all the secret pledges, commitments and Memoranda of Understanding which they had extracted from Washington over a decade. Not only did his programme seem to imply giving back the West Bank, acquiescing in what would almost certainly become an Arab Republic of Palestine, and returning the strategic Golan Heights to Syria; it also signified a crucial change of course for the 'peace process'. Kissinger's bid to wean Egypt from the Arab camp, now so near fruition, was, it would seem, to be abandoned in favour of Carter's pan-Arab free-for-all, in which Israel's regional supremacy, hard won in the 1967 and 1973 wars, risked being thrown away. Faced with this threat – far deadlier than any the Arabs had presented – Israel resolved to fight, and mobilized every asset including its powerful American lobby.

When Prime Minister Rabin paid his first visit to President Carter in March 1977, Carter found him timid, stubborn and ill at ease.[8] This was a misjudgment. Rabin was seething with suppressed rage. Himself a Washington insider for nine years, he viewed Carter as a dangerously inexperienced outsider who looked like giving Israel a lot of trouble before he learned 'political maturity'.[9] To Rabin Carter seemed to be breaking all the rules of the US-Israeli relationship: he took Middle East initiatives without first clearing them with Jerusalem, dared to air disagreements with Israel in public as if to rally American opinion to his side of the argument, and on arms deliveries seemed inclined to demote Israel from its privileged position above that of America's NATO allies. The Israelis were especially put out by Carter's efforts to befriend Asad – so very different from Kissinger's policy of 'letting Asad stew'. Eager to meet Middle East leaders at first hand, Carter in his first weeks in office invited them to Washington. Sadat, Husayn, Rabin and Crown Prince Fahd made the journey, but Asad, no doubt wishing to demonstrate his greater independence, refused the chance to state his views in the White House. 'No thank you', he replied, when Vance brought him the invitation. 'Has the United States still not understood our position after thirty years?'[10] Yet he was delighted when Carter agreed to meet him in neutral Geneva. The Israelis were upset by this deference and Asad's Arab rivals were less than overjoyed.

Middle East rivalries

Jimmy Carter understood that Syria had to be a major player if a comprehensive negotiation were to get under way. But he did not wholly grasp how far the peace process was bound up with regional tussles for power, not just between Israel and individual Arab states but between Arab states themselves. An enduring feature of Middle East politics is a network of inter-state rivalries, which underlie the moves of the principal players irrespective of their ideological colouring. If one of them acquires greater influence it is felt as a loss by the others. Failure to give due weight to this latent competition is often to misunderstand the dynamics of the regional system.

What Asad looked for from the new US Administration was recognition, even political reward. If he was to be a player, his vital interests would have to be addressed, and of these, the most immediate was the need to extend his influence over his neighbours – Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinians – in order to protect his flanks and create some sort of counterweight to Israel now that Sinai Two had removed Egypt from the scene. For a start he had pacified Lebanon, dousing the fires of civil war and putting a stop to the adventurist ambitions of the Lebanese left and its Palestinian allies – at considerable cost to his Arab standing and to his relations with the Soviet Union. He now wanted the extension of Syria's writ in the Levant endorsed. His implicit message to Carter was: Recognize me as the regional man of influence and I will deliver peace and stability.

But there were great difficulties for Carter, or indeed for any American leader, to see things this way. For one, there was no sympathy for Syria's assumption of a right to a say in the affairs of its neighbours, and especially Jordan whose friendship with the West was of long standing. For another, Israel, whose voice was always heard in Washington, was totally opposed to the emergence of a Syria strong enough to challenge its own claim to dominance in the Levant. Indeed, much of the reasoning behind Israel's agreements with Egypt, its support for the Lebanese Maronites, and its numerous contacts with King Husayn was to isolate and enfeeble Syria. Israel was particularly aware that if Syria were unchecked it could prove a dangerously effective sponsor of the Palestinians. But the prospect of a regionally

influential Syria was also a bogey to Asad's Arab brothers. His attempts to extend his writ over Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinians was resented by these players, but it also aroused the fears and jealousies of Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, all nervous of the added prominence Damascus might get if these efforts were to succeed. Suspicion was voiced that Asad was bent on resurrecting a 'Greater Syria' of hegemonic ambitions.

Egypt had no greater liking than Israel for a strong Syria. The fear of a powerful rival on its north-eastern approaches was deeply rooted in Egyptian history: Nasser, King Faruq, Muhammad 'Ali, and indeed the pharaohs had experienced it. Sadat's anger at Asad's criticisms after the October War stemmed not just from wounded vanity or hurt at being accused of abandoning the Arab front, but was also in part an expression of this traditional worry. Iraq, the other hostile pole of Syria's political geography, was equally uneasy at the rise of Damascus as a centre of regional importance – a knee-jerk geopolitical instinct on the part of Baghdad which was sharpened by the long-running feud between the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'th parties. And Saudi wariness of Syrian power was just as persistent. The Saudis were happy to see Syria containing Israel but were less happy at the prospect of Ba'thist power extending through Jordan to their own northern frontier. The Saudis' concern to contain Asad could be seen in their advice to King Husayn to draw back from too close ties with him, in their efforts to supplant him as the arbiter between Maronites and Palestinians, and in the scaling down of their financial aid. Legend has it that on his deathbed the founder of the modern Saudi state, King 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sa'ud, advised his sons to 'keep your eye on Syria', because, he explained, any expansion of Syrian influence, particularly if it meant a Syrian link with either Iraq or Egypt, was a threat to Saudi interests.

Beyond inter-Arab rivalries lay the profound issue of whose order was to prevail in the Middle East, a question which had remained open ever since the end of the Ottoman era in 1918. The supremacy of Britain and France between the world wars had provided only a temporary answer. With the rise of Nasser in the 1950s there was for a few brief years the possibility of an indigenous 'Arab nationalist' order in which Arabs would shape their own environment, but these hopes were extinguished by Israel in the Six Day War and were only partially revived by Arab efforts in the October War. The order implicit in Kissinger's post-1973 diplomacy was the very antithesis of Arab nationalism, as in breaking up the Egyptian-Syrian alliance he resolutely ruled out any effective Arab combination. His vision was of an American-sponsored system, in which Israel would be the

cornerstone in a new partnership with a tamed and neutered Egypt. Kissinger and Israel presented the new arrangements as the best way to safeguard Western interests from Soviet encroachments, but behind this smokescreen the real point was whether an Arab or an Israeli order would prevail. Under Nasser Egypt had been the linchpin of an Arab system, but under Sadat Egypt changed camps, with grim consequences for lesser Arab states.

Asad had won greater visibility and attention for himself and for his country in the three years since the October War, but his overall strategic position was far from solid. Kissinger, Israel and his Arab rivals had seen to that. He was at a turning-point: either his ascent would continue by way of a new phase in the peace process, or his hard-won gains risked being taken from him, reducing him to insignificance.

Some of these complexities may have escaped Jimmy Carter when, full of good intentions, he sought to probe what sort of man Asad was and what he had to say about the knotty problem of the Palestinians. Certainly Carter had little inkling of Asad's hopes and ambitions or of his resentment at the way American policy had all too often thwarted him.

Meeting with Carter

Asad's seven hours with Carter at the Geneva Intercontinental on 9 May 1977,[11] in a blaze of world attention, carried the Syrian leader to the highest peak he had yet scaled and seemed to assure him a place in a revitalized peace process. He could not resist opening the meeting with an hour-long history lesson on the reality of Arab insecurity and Israeli expansionism, and on the long record of Western high-handedness in the region. He was gratified to see an attentive Carter nodding and taking notes. Asad felt that the new American president grasped the essence of the Arab-Israeli problem, in itself an enormous step forward from his standpoint. The two men got on well: as Carter disarmingly remarked, they were both country boys made good, and they were soon at ease with each other. Asad was taken by Carter's warmth, by his serious interest in the area, and by his readiness to seek advice on the complex problems it presented, whereas Carter for his part was glad to discover that Asad had a sense of humour. He summed him up as a self-confident leader of independent mind whose sense of the past endowed him with patience to confront the present.

Asad was encouraged to find that the American president had an

open mind on the two critical issues of Palestinian rights and Israeli withdrawal. In front of the press, and with Asad beside him, Carter repeated his support for a Palestinian homeland, and later, in face-to-face talks, hinted that he would work to convince Israel to pull back to its pre-1967 borders. Carter in turn was reassured to find that Asad seemed ready for peace and was willing to consider concrete steps – such as ending the state of belligerency, setting up demilitarized areas and buffer zones patrolled by peace-keeping forces, securing guarantees, and pressing ahead with economic reconstruction – to help bring it about.

But the friendly atmosphere obscured the vast chasm between them. On the boundaries question Asad made clear to Carter that no Arab leader could agree to give up territory no matter how great his desire for peace. He ridiculed the concept of 'secure borders' in an age of modern weapons, and mocked the Israeli view that it could win security by taking other people's land. 'The Israelis claim that they took the Golan to protect their settlements', he said, 'but then they built new settlements on the Golan, some of them only three hundred metres from our positions!' What, he wanted to know, was the American view on permanent boundaries, seeing that Israel would take Damascus if it could? Carter would make no promises.

The problem which took up most of their time was what to do about the Palestinians and, in spite of Carter's patent goodwill and his references to a 'homeland', here too the obstacles were fearsome. Kissinger had thrown up two roadblocks to keep the Palestinians out of the peace process. He had given Israel the right to veto any new participants in the Geneva conference, and he had pledged that the United States would not talk to the PLO unless it accepted Resolution 242 and Israel's right to exist. Carter sought Asad's help in overcoming these obstacles: was there a way, he asked, to get to talk to 'Arafat? Could the PLO be induced to make a statement accepting 242, perhaps with a reservation about the Resolution's depiction of the Palestinians as refugees? Carter saw Kissinger's pledge as a procedural hurdle to be cleared in order to allow the Palestinians to be drawn into the negotiations.

Asad, however, was more concerned with substance than procedure. What could Carter offer the Palestinians, he asked. How did he define their rights? How could they be expected to accept Resolution 242 or recognize Israel before they had been assured of the recovery of the West Bank and Gaza? King Husayn had told him that Israel had offered Jordan a mere ten kilometres of the West Bank in final settlement! But, Asad continued, the return of the West Bank and Gaza would not in itself be enough to solve the problem. The hundreds of thousands of dispossessed refugees had also to be given the choice, in accordance with the UN resolutions, of returning to their country or of receiving compensation.

The gulf between procedure and substance was clearly revealed. In the following weeks Carter and Vance made repeated attempts to get the PLO to issue a statement which would open the way to a dialogue with Washington. To Israel's indignation, Vance even went so far as to suggest an acceptable form of words.[12] But the United States could not promise the PLO a seat at the Geneva negotiating table – Israel's veto prevented that – still less a Palestinian state. Faced with this negative prospect, 'Arafat's Executive Committee refused to give up what it considered its 'last card' – recognition of Israel.

The PLO undoubtedly wanted a dialogue with the United States: it made many gestures of goodwill, providing bodyguards for Americans in Lebanon in 1976, helping arrange the evacuation of American civilians from the civil war, and even supplying intelligence which saved the lives of US diplomats.[13] But it could not bring itself to utter the words Carter wanted. In the years that followed it was endlessly debated whether or not the Palestinians had missed a unique opportunity. The truth was that the Israeli-Kissinger roadblocks proved extraordinarily effective and, as Vance wrote, were 'to make our task of finding a way to deal with the PLO close to impossible'.[14]

Did Carter and Vance give too much weight to Kissinger's pledge to Israel? At least one American diplomat, Ambassador Talcott Seelye, believed that Carter was wrong to interpret it as ruling out even exploratory contacts with the PLO. He recalled being told by the author of the pledge, Henry Kissinger himself, that had the Republicans won the 1976 election, he would have engaged the Palestinians in a dialogue.[15] If it was all right for Kissinger to consider talking to the PLO, should Carter have been inhibited from doing so? In the event, no US-PLO dialogue was started and no Palestinian took part in negotiations. The Palestinians remained condemned to continued occupation or dispossession.

These frustrations were in the future: in May 1977 there was a moment of keen optimism. After taking leave of Carter in Geneva, Asad told his staff of his great hope in the new president and indicated that he looked forward to further meetings with him. But the promise of that first encounter was never realized and Asad did not see Carter again – until the latter visited him in Damascus some years later as a private citizen. Syria was to be cut out of the peace process as swiftly and decisively as the Palestinians.

What went wrong? At Geneva Asad's approach was perhaps too leisurely, too maximalist, too concerned with principles and the legacy of history and too little with the operational nuts and bolts of getting a negotiation started. In counting on Carter to impose a settlement on Israel, Asad may have succumbed to the Arab failing of overlooking the severe domestic pressures to which any American president is subject when dealing with the Middle East. Moreover, there was no co-ordination on peace-making in the Arab camp but on the contrary the familiar rivalries and suspicions: Sadat had no intention of letting Asad dictate his peace diplomacy; Husayn shared Israel's alarm at Carter's courtship of the PLO; while the Palestinians, eager to control their own destinies, distrusted all Arab governments almost as much as they hated Israel. Even Asad's small triumph in getting the American president to meet him in Switzerland was hollow, in the judgment of a senior US official:[16] he would have made more impact had he gone to Washington. If his intention was to influence the US Administration, there was no virtue in staying away.

But none of this would have mattered had Israel not skilfully seized the initiative from both Carter and Asad.

Enter the Likud

The task of subverting Jimmy Carter's Middle East policy and of removing Asad and the Palestinians from the peace process fell to Menachem Begin and his Foreign Minister, Moshe Dayan. Begin, the great outsider of Israeli politics since the foundation of the state, startled the world by defeating the long-serving Labour Party at the Israeli elections of May 1977. He brought to the premiership most of the ideas of his mentor, the Russian-born agitator Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1944) whose muscular 'Revisionist Zionism' had taken shape in opposition to the gradualist strategy of mainstream Socialist Zionism. Strong on rhetoric, Jabotinsky had between the world wars called for mass Jewish settlement in Palestine and the unabashed use of force against the Arabs to establish full Jewish sovereignty on both banks of the Jordan. He argued that a Zionist state could not be secured by compromises with the Arabs but needed the protection of an 'iron wall'. War was not simply a measure of last resort but a legitimate means of national conquest.

Born in 1913 in the then Polish town of Brest-Litovsk, Begin had risen through Betar, Jabotinsky's brown-shirted youth movement, becoming its leader shortly before the Second World War. When the Russians invaded Poland in 1939 he was sent to a Siberian prison

camp and on being freed in 1941 joined the Polish army in exile and was posted to Palestine in 1942 as an English-language translator. He deserted and in 1943 took over the local Revisionist militia, the Irgun, which used terror tactics against the British, the Arabs and also against the Hagana, the Labour-controlled Jewish underground army. Among Irgun operations were the attack on the British army headquarters at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in June 1946, the massacre of Arab villagers at Dayr Yasin in April 1948, and the suicidal voyage two months later of the illegal arms ship *Altalena* which brought Irgun into direct military conflict with David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, who was to remain Begin's life-long enemy. In the wake of the *Altalena* incident, the Irgun was forced to disarm. So, to continue the Revisionist struggle for a Jewish homeland on *both* sides of the Jordan, Begin founded the 'Freedom Movement', Herut – denounced by such prominent Jews as Albert Einstein and Hannah Arendt (in a celebrated letter to the *New York Times* on 4 December 1948) as 'closely akin in its organization, methods, political philosophy and social appeal to the Nazi and Fascist parties'.

For nearly twenty years Begin was to remain on the extremist fringe of Israeli politics. But his political fortunes brightened in 1965 with the formation of Gahal, a parliamentary bloc, under his leadership, of Herut and the businessmen's Liberal Party. Full respectability followed when he was brought into the National Unity cabinet on the eve of the 1967 war by generals who shared his view that Labour had blundered in leaving the West Bank in Arab hands in 1948 and that the opportunity for 'liberating' it must not now be missed. To celebrate his appointment, Begin climbed Mount Herzl the next day to salute the grave of Jabotinsky.

The conquests of the Six Day War turned Begin's Revisionist ideology into practical politics. Now his all-absorbing cause became to prevent the return of the West Bank to the Arabs. When in 1970 Golda Meir accepted the Rogers Plan with its implication that Israel might consider trading land for peace, Begin resigned from the government. In 1973 he joined General Ariel Sharon, the personification of Israeli militarism, in forming the Likud, a coalition of right-wing parties which in 1977 put an end to twenty-nine years of Labour rule, whereupon he promptly hung a portrait of his revered Jabotinsky in the prime minister's office.

Begin's immediate objective was to destroy Carter's Middle East policy which threatened to push Israel back to its pre-Six Day War frontiers and open the door to Palestinian nationalism, and to this task he brought a good deal of guile and zeal.

It took Begin and his Foreign Minister, Dayan, from July to October

1977 to force Carter to abandon what they considered his dangerous policies. Success was achieved with a two-track strategy. The first consisted of a concerted campaign against Carter's declared objectives, ranging from harassment to stonewalling and open defiance, with special focus on Carter's proposed Geneva conference which Begin was resolved would be held on his terms if it was held at all. The second was to bypass the Geneva conference altogether and lure Egypt into a bilateral agreement. These two tracks were pursued simultaneously, no doubt on the view that, if the second failed, the first could provide a tolerable fallback position.

So far as Geneva was concerned, Carter wanted Palestinian participation, Begin would have none of it. Carter wanted Israel to acknowledge that Resolution 242 meant withdrawal on all fronts, Begin never tired of affirming that the West Bank was 'liberated', not occupied, and that he would never give it up. Carter wanted a moratorium on Jewish settlements to allay Arab fears, whereupon Begin promptly founded new ones. He repeatedly reminded Carter of the commitments Kissinger had entered into and pressed him and Secretary Vance to refrain from publicly airing views at variance with Israel's. After his first encounter with Carter in July 1977, Begin was alleged to have privately described the president as a 'cream puff'.[17] The formidable resources of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee were mobilized against him to such effect that Carter, bruised and defensive, was soon back-tracking on all the major issues.

The high point of Israel's subversion of Carter's objectives was reached following the publication on 1 October 1977 of a joint US-Soviet communiqué on the Middle East. The two superpowers, co-chairmen of the first Geneva conference, called for its early reconvening to negotiate 'a fundamental solution to all aspects of the Middle East problem in its entirety'. The settlement was to include 'withdrawal of Israeli Armed Forces from territories occupied in the 1967 conflict; the resolution of the Palestinian question, including ensuring the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people; termination of the state of war and establishment of normal peaceful relations . . .' Dayan had been given a draft of the communiqué two days earlier, time enough to alert the lobby: the uproar among Israel's friends in and out of Congress was tremendous. It was not only the references to Israeli withdrawal and Palestinian rights which outraged the lobby, but also the reappearance on the scene of the Soviet Union, seen as the Arabs' chief support. The barrage of protest took the Administration aback.

As it happened, the Syrians were slow to grasp the significance of the joint communiqué and did little to advance their own interests at

this crucial moment. At a meeting at the UN Plaza Hotel the day after the statement was published, Vance asked Foreign Minister Khaddam for his reactions. 'When the Americans and the Soviets agree about something, we Arabs tend to be suspicious', Khaddam joked. It was the wrong signal, suggesting to Vance that the Arabs were scarcely more enthusiastic about the joint US-Soviet initiative than the Israelis.

At this point Dayan moved in for the kill. On the night of 4–5 October, he confronted Carter, Vance and Brzezinski in more than five hours of bargaining at the US mission to the United Nations. Dayan's tactics were rough. The statement was totally unacceptable to Israel, he said, and he asked Carter to state publicly that he stood by all past understandings and secret agreements between the United States and Israel – if not, Israel might publish them. He wanted Carter to proclaim his opposition to any form of Palestinian state. When Carter demurred, Dayan threatened to announce that he had asked for such an assurance and that Carter had refused to give it – a ploy Brzezinski later described as blackmail.[18] Dayan correctly judged that Carter, already shaken by clashes with American Jewish leaders, would not relish a showdown and would draw back from putting the quarrel before the American public.

The turning-point of the night's negotiations came when, in an admission that he needed Dayan's help to get the troublesome Jewish lobby off his back, Carter said to Dayan, 'Let's talk politics'.[19] Dayan seized the opening to press his advantage, and from that moment on the president's need to placate Israel's friends in the United States won precedence over his commitment to a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East.

That night he instructed Vance to work out an agreed position with Dayan. By the early hours of 5 October the US-Soviet communiqué was gutted and the rules for Geneva rewritten in a US-Israeli Working Paper. A short statement issued after the night's labours stated that acceptance of the US-Soviet communiqué of 1 October was 'not a prerequisite for the reconvening and conduct of the Geneva Conference'. Carter had climbed down.

Asad's regional needs and ambitions were simply disregarded. To check Egypt from making a separate agreement with Israel, he had been pressing for a unified Arab delegation to do the actual negotiating at Geneva. He also wanted Syria to participate in the discussion of the Palestine problem. The US-Israeli Working Paper denied him both. It provided that after an opening plenary session, the conference would break up into bilateral committees to negotiate bilateral peace treaties. In other words, Asad would lose all control over Sadat. Moreover,

Syria was the one interested party excluded from the working group on the West Bank and Gaza – a group which the Working Paper specified would consist of Israel, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Arabs.

Dayan secured the exclusion of Syria – his principal aim – by making a tactical concession over Palestinian participation. To Carter's relief, even gratitude, he agreed that some Palestinians such as West Bank mayors could participate in the opening session and in the West Bank working group, provided Israel could weed out known PLO members. Candidly he spelled out the long-held Israeli argument for sidestepping Syria and making peace with Egypt alone. If one wheel were removed, he argued, the car could not run again. Peace with Egypt was the way to stabilize the region and rule out the possibility of war.

Asad was dismayed at the outcome of Dayan's efforts: Israel had managed to strip him of all control over other Arab parties and to keep out the PLO. Bilateral committees meant that Israel could deal with a fragmented Arab world. Worse still, Carter now saw Asad as an obstacle and charged him with going back on his earlier promise of co-operation. In recalling this period a decade later, Cyrus Vance still held to the view that Asad had 'cut himself out'. By insisting on control of the whole Arab side, 'he missed the chance to participate in a broad conference in which everything could have been discussed including the return of the Golan Heights. This was not only unwise, it was self-defeating. Asad shot himself in the foot.'[20] But in the opinion of another American, Talcott Seelye, who became ambassador to Syria in August 1978, 'Israel was determined to cut Syria out and do a deal with Egypt alone. Even had Syria moved faster and been more flexible, it is doubtful whether it would have got any satisfaction.'[21] The record appears to support this latter interpretation.

Asad's case may have gone by default. He did not fight his corner strongly enough. He sent no envoy to Washington to protest about the neglect of his interests in the US-Israeli Working Paper, although it must be said that, unlike Dayan, he was in no position to intervene at the top. Instead he attempted to put pressure where he could, sending Foreign Minister Khaddam and Deputy Defence Minister Naji Jamil on tours of the Arab states to ask them to intervene with Sadat to reject the US-Israeli proposals. General Jamil even went to Cairo on 22 October to lecture the Egyptian leader on his duties to the Arab cause, only managing to exasperate Sadat and prompt him to throw off Syrian fetters once and for all.

The wooing of Sadat

The Israeli government had meanwhile made considerable progress towards its aim of a direct dialogue with Sadat, the second track of its campaign to scuttle Carter's Middle East policy. It is widely supposed that Sadat himself, by his dramatic journey to Jerusalem in November 1977, launched the process leading to Egyptian-Israeli peace. But the first moves were in fact made by the Israelis. It was they who covertly importuned Sadat to deal bilaterally. This necessarily involved a certain deception of their American ally, seeing that Carter was still wedded to the objective of a comprehensive, multilateral settlement. To embark on so significant a political initiative without consulting Washington and at variance with Washington's declared aims represented a major departure from the close political and operational co-ordination with the United States which Israel had hitherto pressed for. But as Begin was scheming to entrap Sadat, he needed freedom from American constraints.[22]

In wooing Sadat, Israel sought the help of three leaders who were well-placed to act as intermediaries. Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania had for several years been involved in attempts at Middle East peacemaking; the Shah of Iran, Israel's main regional ally, was also on good terms with Sadat, as was King Hasan of Morocco who also maintained discreet but long-standing contacts with Israel, largely by way of the Moroccan Jewish community. Begin began his seduction of Sadat by asking Ceausescu whom he called on in Bucharest at the end of August 1977 to help arrange a meeting between himself and the Egyptian President.[23] Also that August, Dayan called on the Shah in Tehran with the same request,[24] and in the first week of September he flew secretly to Morocco to enlist the good offices of King Hasan as well.[25] This three-pronged diplomatic effort bore fruit on 16 September when Sadat's confidant, Deputy Premier Hasan al-Tuhami, came stealthily to Tangier to hear Dayan argue the case for an Egyptian-Israeli summit.

Sadat was intrigued by these overtures and he was certainly attracted by Dayan's promise that the whole of Sinai could be restored. This was the big prize, but there were other arguments. Sadat shared the Israelis' dislike of negotiating in an open forum at Geneva under the eye of suspicious, even hostile, parties such as the Soviet Union and Syria. Again like Israel, he was unimpressed with Carter's vision of a settlement to satisfy everyone, so at odds with Kissinger's scheme of a tripartite partnership of the United States, Israel and Egypt which

would direct the affairs of the region and keep troublemakers down. As an added inducement to deal direct, Israel provided Sadat with intelligence warnings of a Libyan-backed plot to overthrow him.[26]

To help him assess Israeli motives, Sadat himself went to Bucharest and Tehran in late October to consult Ceausescu and the Shah. He wanted to hear from them what Begin and Dayan had said. And, according to his own testimony, it was on this journey that the idea of going to Jerusalem first came to him.[27]

Such was the background to Sadat's shock announcement on 9 November that he was ready to go to the end of the world in search of peace, even 'to the Knesset itself', and when he arrived at Jerusalem's Ben Gurion Airport ten days later, it was evident that Israel's second track had proved brilliantly successful, killing the Geneva conference stone dead. All the disputes about who should be invited and about how negotiations should be conducted were suddenly rendered meaningless. Thoroughly upstaged, the Carter Administration had no alternative but to ditch its own policies and join the Israeli-Egyptian bandwagon.

Last meeting with Sadat

Asad's last great duel with Sadat took place in Damascus on the night of 16–17 November 1977 when for seven hours the two men argued, pleaded with and stormed at each other, but in the end it was a dialogue of the deaf which left them more at loggerheads than ever and intent on pursuing their separate paths. Sadat had come in a last-ditch attempt to get Asad to approve his direct dealings with Israel – or at least to win his silence. The long bitter night was the climax of four years of growing estrangement rooted in the disappointments of the October War, but which was greatly envenomed by Sadat's moves towards a separate relationship with Israel. This was to be their last meeting.

At one point in their long argument, Sadat exclaimed: 'Let us go together to Jerusalem! Or, if you cannot come, then please keep silent. Don't condemn me. If I fail, I will admit I was wrong and tell my people to give you the leadership.'[28] Asad was baffled by such histrionics. Sadat was always in a hurry – in a hurry to end the October War, in a hurry to disengage, in a hurry to go to Jerusalem and so destroy the chances of a comprehensive settlement. Now he was about to jump into recognition of Israel before bargaining had even started. He was proposing to begin at the point where a wise man might after long negotiation hope to end up. So great was Asad's exasperation that for a moment he thought of locking up the Egyptian leader and preventing him leaving Damascus.[29]

But beyond the confrontation between the two leaders lay the stubborn facts of divergent national trajectories. Egypt and Syria were heading in different directions, and not surprisingly viewed the problem of how to deal with Israel from opposite standpoints. Asad had been totally opposed to Sadat's contacts with Israel from the moment of Egypt's unilateral ceasefire in October 1973, and his alarm had grown sharper following Egypt's disengagement agreements, especially Sinai Two which in his view robbed the Arabs of what little advantage they had won in the October War. Asad was by now obsessed with the geopolitical equation: it was blindingly obvious to him, yet apparently not at all clear to Sadat, that the formal removal of Egypt from the Arab camp would leave the rest of the Arab world a prey to Israeli designs. In language more highly charged than he customarily used, he warned Sadat of the catastrophic consequences of his journey. It would be the gravest setback in Arab history. It would produce such a strategic imbalance that Israel would be able to hit one defenceless Arab country after another, beginning with Lebanon and the Palestinians. Far from bringing peace, it would banish it. Indeed anything short of a comprehensive peace was not worth having.[30] As he expounded these passionate arguments, Asad was unaware – and this lent irony to the occasion – that Sadat's secret contacts with Israel had already taken him beyond the point of no return.

Asad's doom-laden gloom was in sharp contrast to Sadat's ebullient confidence on the eve of his great adventure. The Egyptian leader had a showman's instinct for the dramatic happening. He had decided to brazen out his incipient love-affair with Israel and fly in person to the enemy's capital where he would preach his message of reconciliation from the Knesset itself, changing the course of history in a single breath-taking act. Psychological barriers thrown up by long years of conflict would come tumbling down and Israel would grasp his outstretched hand. He hoped that Begin would respond to his own grand gesture with a pledge to withdraw from all the occupied territory. He had not grasped that Begin intended to return Egyptian territory alone precisely in order to retain the rest. In Begin's mind, peace with Egypt was the key not to dismantling Eretz Israel but to making it impregnable.

By the morning of 17 November, Asad and Sadat were too angry with each other even to hold a joint press conference, and Sadat faced the press alone. He acknowledged Asad's opposition but confirmed his

own decision to go to Jerusalem. Later that night, on his return to Cairo, it was announced that the journey would take place two days hence, on 19 November. Asad waited for his guest to leave before speaking out.[31]

> I am extremely sad that I could not convince Sadat of the gravity of this visit and of its far-reaching consequences for our Arab cause. Peace is our aim in Syria, as it is in Egypt and in the whole Arab world. But a successful strategy cannot be pursued through unsuccessful tactics.

The 19th of November was declared a day of national mourning.

Given everything that was at stake, it was a low-key reaction. Asad hoped to avoid a total breach with Egypt and the increased vulnerability it would bring him. Even after Sadat's visit to Jerusalem he denied that there was a 'divorce' between Syria and Egypt, to allow for the slim chance that Israel's niggardliness might yet cause Sadat to draw back.

Later, when it became evident that Asad's pessimism was more realistic than Sadat's hopes, it was commonly said that Sadat had pursued a personal and impetuous course without popular backing. In fact, though the manner of his diplomacy was indubitably his own, he was in many ways faithfully reflecting the national grievances and aspirations of his countrymen. In the mind of many Egyptians, a move towards peace with Israel was not a retreat into isolation but, on the contrary, an affirmation of Egyptian leadership. Sadat was determined to lead the Arabs in peace as in war, believing that where he blazed a trail, others would have to follow. Anti-Syrian feeling ran strongly in Egypt. Cut to the quick by Asad's accusations of treachery after the October War, nursing a whole catalogue of grievances against the Ba'th party, some of them dating back to the unhappy union, Sadat was anxious to put Damascus in its place. He gave a clue to his thinking when he urged Herman Eilts, the US ambassador in Cairo, to remind Asad that Cairo was the capital of the Arab world. In bursting out of the Geneva framework, he was freeing himself from unwelcome Syrian shackles.

In the last days of October, Carter wrote two letters to Sadat confessing that he could not get all the parties to agree the procedures for Geneva laid down in the US-Israeli Working Paper – meaning principally Syria. He proposed joining with the Soviet Union in calling on the UN Secretary-General to convene the conference, counting on the Soviets to bring Asad along. To Sadat this meant giving Asad a

hold over his diplomacy: Carter's letters may have precipitated his decision to bypass Geneva. For, as the Saudis told Washington on 28 October, Asad was about to agree to attend the conference if the co-chairmen put Palestinian rights and an Israeli withdrawal on the agenda.[32]

Syria was not Sadat's only bugbear. Like many Egyptians, he also bore a grudge against the plutocrats of the Gulf who owed their oil billions to Egypt's sacrifices in the October War and yet were terribly reluctant to share their wealth. On one of his fund-raising trips to the Gulf Sadat to his great humiliation overheard someone say, 'Here comes the beggar'. In January 1977, after Cairo had been shaken by food riots, a high-level Saudi delegation promised massive financial aid – but failed to come up to Sadat's expectations. All these were reasons for wanting to break out of the cycle of war and poverty. Driven by economic need, Sadat was lured by the thought of tapping American wealth in an Egyptian 'Marshall Plan', an idea which Kissinger had first planted in his head.[33]

But whatever the exact balance of Sadat's motives Asad's unshakeable view thereafter was that Sadat destroyed the chances for a comprehensive settlement at Geneva by going it alone. His tone against the Egyptian leader hardened. The Syrian media compared Sadat to the Nazi collaborators Quisling and Pétain and his visit was described as treachery and capitulation. The thread which had snapped during the confrontation in Damascus in November 1977 was never mended.

Camp David accords

Ten months were to elapse before Begin, Sadat and Carter put their names to the Camp David accords of September 1978, and a further six months before the signature of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty of 26 March 1979. This was the time it took Menachem Begin to bend Sadat and Carter to his will.

To succeed in its designs, Israel had first to whittle down Sadat's expectations expressed in his Knesset speech of 20 November 1977. He had offered Israel peace, security, normal relations with its neighbours and whatever international guarantees it chose, provided it withdrew from the territories occupied in 1967 and allowed the Palestinians to establish their own state. Neither of these preconditions survived the grinding months of negotiation.

Carter's high ambitions were also disappointed. He had wanted to be the architect of an overall settlement, but instead found himself

realizing what by now was Begin's blueprint. A mere couple of months after Sadat's Jerusalem visit, Carter set about promoting an Egyptian-Israeli agreement only loosely connected to the Palestine problem: a dialogue with the PLO was removed from his agenda, Syria no longer seemed a necessary player and the Soviet Union was ignored.

This remarkable reversal of policy owed much to Begin's unshakeable refusal to budge from the West Bank, to Sadat's uncertain commitment to the Palestinians and to the Syrians, to Carter's domestic weakness in the face of Israel's friends, and to the Administration's weary need to get an agreement of some sort. At the end of the day Washington accepted Israel's argument that an Egyptian-Israeli peace ruled out the threat of war and was therefore in America's interest.

The scaling down of the peace process from its original multilateral aims to its bilateral outcome was a two-stage affair: Dayan masterminded the first and Begin the second. It was essentially Dayan's achievement to detach Egypt from Syria by his secret courting of Sadat; and it was then Begin's achievement to unlink Egypt from the West Bank, a coup he pulled off at Camp David by playing on his own fearsome reputation. When the discussion came to focus on the future of the West Bank, Begin delivered an emotional tirade: 'I, Menachem Begin, steward of four thousand years of Jewish history, cannot be the one to give up the historic claim to the Biblical lands.' But privately he added to Vance, 'I won't be prime minister five years from now' – hinting, in effect, that further progress could be made when he was gone. By this stratagem he won Carter's and Sadat's agreement to defer the question of ultimate sovereignty over the West Bank until after a transition period in which the Palestinians would enjoy a limited form of autonomy, so uncoupling its fate from the Egypt-Israel accord.[34]

In the end Sadat made peace on the basis of two accords with no formal link between them: one was a strictly bilateral deal providing for the return of Egyptian territory alone, and the other was a set of vague provisions for Palestinian autonomy. All along Begin had intended to give up Sinai in order to have *carte blanche* on the West Bank – which, under the subterfuge of his Palestinian home rule proposals, is what he got.

The Camp David negotiations from 6 to 17 September 1978 ended with another Begin coup – a muddle over settlements in the occupied territories.[35] Carter thought he had secured a pledge from Begin to freeze settlements until the negotiations on West Bank autonomy were completed, and with this assurance he got Sadat to approve the two accords. But there was no written pledge from Begin to support Carter's understanding. Instead Begin claimed that he had agreed to no more than a three-month suspension, and it was then the sorry task of Ambassador Herman Eilts to tell Sadat that there had been a 'misunderstanding' over settlements. 'You are sending me home naked', Sadat grimly replied.[36] Khaddam, Syria's Foreign Minister, had predicted that Camp David would be 'Sadat's last striptease'.[37] The fact that Carter chose not to confront Begin on this crucial matter but let the Israeli version stand, was perhaps the clearest indication of the supremacy Begin had won over his negotiating partners.

Alienation

A week after Camp David, Cyrus Vance called on Asad in Damascus for sad but courteous farewells – something of a leave-taking between Syria and the United States. Kissinger had visited Asad in similar circumstances at the time of Sinai Two, but for Vance, a liberal lawyer of enlightened views who had genuinely hoped for a comprehensive settlement, it was a more uncomfortable occasion. Vance liked Asad and considered him one of the most intelligent of the Arab leaders, but he knew the United States had achieved nothing for Syria.[38]

> I remember Asad said something to me along the lines that he was weary and was now going to sit on the side of the road and observe events. If circumstances changed, he would not hesitate to change his position, although as in the past he would always be guided by the paramount interests of Syria.

Asad had suffered many disappointments at the hands of the United States, but Carter's betrayal, as he saw it, was particularly painful because he had expected so much from the new Administration. Although he continued to keep open a channel to Washington, by 1979 his alienation from the United States was almost total as he felt his vital interests had not only been disregarded but deliberately undercut. He never visited the United States nor rid himself of a deep distrust of US intentions towards him. Nevertheless, in September 1979, on a flight to Cuba to attend a non-aligned summit, his aircraft strayed into US air space and he found himself obliged to radio a polite greeting to Jimmy Carter.

But Asad's alienation from Egypt was if anything more profound. On coming to power he had joined with Egypt to wrest the occupied territories back from Israel. And he had failed. The Golan and the West Bank were more firmly than ever in Israeli control and Egypt, his

partner in war, was now Israel's partner in peace. His struggle to hold Sadat back had been in vain and the Syrian-Egyptian axis, backbone of Arab strength, was broken. As a Ba'thist, as an Arab nationalist and as a Syrian, Asad took it hard. It was a profoundly gloomy moment.

To what extent was Asad himself responsible for what had happened? Could it have been otherwise? Would greater tact and deference have held Sadat in the Arab camp? There is no evidence that Asad asked himself these questions. Perhaps after all there was something irreconcilable about wanting to keep Egypt as a partner and yet being resolved to make Damascus a regional centre of power in its own right. Asad had given Syria a strength and importance it had never had before, he had endowed it with the will and the means to project influence beyond its borders. As such it had become a rival of Egypt which, even though enfeebled and disillusioned by thankless wars, had been accustomed to primacy in Arab affairs. It was perhaps inevitable that Asad and Sadat should fall out.

Searching for help

Sadat's overtures to Israel from 1977 to the peace treaty of March 1979 exposed Asad to two distinct perils: physical destruction by means of a surprise Israeli attack, or political destruction – the marginalization of Syria and even his own downfall – if Sadat were to draw other Arab states in Egypt's wake. So Asad's immediate priorities were, first, military protection and, second, the isolation of Egypt to prevent the general 'capitulation' he feared.

Among Arab countries Iraq seemed the only possible military counterweight to Israel. It was a measure of Asad's need that, although he was at daggers drawn with the Iraqi leaders, he appealed to them on 20 November 1977 – the day of Sadat's Knesset speech – to bury the hatchet and 'face our pan-Arab responsibilities'.[39] His call for help was all the more remarkable because it came amid a welter of tit-for-tat plots, frontier closures and explosions in each other's capitals. Barely a month earlier, on 25 October, Asad's Foreign Minister Khaddam had narrowly escaped death at the hands of a pro-Iraqi Palestinian gunman in Abu Dhabi. But Iraq turned a deaf ear to Asad's pleas, no doubt gleeful at his difficulties. So there was no help to be had from that quarter.

Asad then rallied what Arab friends he had in a high-sounding 'Front of Steadfastness and Resistance' which met in Qadhafi's capital, Tripoli, on 5 December 1977 to condemn Sadat. But the front gave

him little real comfort: Algeria, its most substantial component, was by now locked in conflict with Morocco over the Western Sahara; the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen was weak and far away; 'Arafat's PLO was as much adversary as partner; while Libya was both too erratic and too 'rejectionist' for Asad's sober taste. All this was shadow-boxing with no real substance to it.

Asad came to feel that only the Soviet Union could protect him against a possible Israeli blow to finish him off. But unfortunately his relations with Moscow left much to be desired. Egypt's switch from East to West, robbing Moscow of a strategic foothold and cutting it out of peace diplomacy, had made the Russians sceptical of Arab friendship. Nor had they yet forgiven Asad his Lebanon intervention of 1976 when he routed their leftist friends. At the time they expressed their displeasure by refusing to replace ammunition expended in that campaign and by dragging their feat on new arms deliveries. But now Asad needed arms more desperately than at any time since 1973, so it was with cap in hand that Khaddam rushed to Moscow a week after Sadat's Knesset appearance and that Chief of Staff Shihabi followed him a month later. Asad himself went in February 1978 to put his case for new tanks and aircraft, and especially for an air defence system, and won the satisfaction of a reference in the final communiqué to 'raising the level of [Syria's] defensive capability'.[40] But the pledge was painfully slow in being honoured.

Clearly the Russians took some persuading that Asad was worth bailing out. They needed concrete evidence. In June 1978 he allowed a Soviet naval squadron to call in at the port of Latakia, a facility he had denied them following the row over Lebanon. But it was to take two visits to Moscow by Shihabi, a further visit by Asad in October 1978, public Syrian complaints of Soviet dilatoriness, a five-day stay by Defence Minister Tlas in January 1979 and finally a visit to Damascus by Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko on 26 March 1979 – the day of the signature of the Egypt-Israel treaty – before the Soviets threw themselves behind Syria's defence effort. So, as Begin drew Sadat's teeth, Asad spent sixteen nail-biting months, from November 1977 to March 1979, pleading with the Soviet Union to give him a minimum of deterrence.

In these months the moment of maximum danger came when Israel invaded Lebanon in March 1978, seizing the whole of south Lebanon up to the Litani river and sending a panic-stricken population fleeing northwards. 'Operation Litani' was portrayed as a response to the Palestinian hijack of an Israeli bus on the coast south of Haifa on 11 March when more than thirty Israeli civilians were killed in the

subsequent shoot-out. But in scope and destructiveness, the Israeli invasion dwarfed the incident which had provoked it. Some 2,000 Lebanese and Palestinians were killed and an estimated 200,000 displaced from their homes. Angry at what he saw as Israel's disproportionate violence, Carter told Begin to pull his troops out and lent American backing to the despatch of a UN force, UNIFIL, as a buffer in south Lebanon between Israel and the PLO. After three months the Israelis did depart, but not before establishing a buffer zone of their own along the border under a Lebanese proxy, Major Sa'd Haddad, and greatly expanding their contacts with the Maronites of Mount Lebanon to the North. Israeli arms flowed into the Lebanese port of Junieh and Israel's relations with the rising militia leader, Bashir Jumayil, grew closer.

Asad feared that Israel's Litani Operation was the prelude to an attack on Syria itself. He had some 30,000 troops in Lebanon, but he was in no shape to take on the invaders. His Golan front was depleted, his men ill-equipped, his air defences negligible, and his air force less of a match than ever for the Israeli air force. In Lebanon some of his troops, exposed to an increasingly anarchic society, were being sucked into smuggling and other misbehaviour. More ominously, in 1978 Syrian forces were clashing fiercely with Christian militiamen of the Lebanese Front armed by Israel. Asad could not risk a general conflict, so, at considerable political cost to himself, he kept out of the fight. Instead, he concentrated on defending the approaches to Damascus, vital to his security – in other words, the Biqa' valley, now seen more than ever as Syria's forward defence line. But the experience of passivity was a humiliating one and a reminder of the leverage Israel had over him in Lebanon.

Reconciliation with Iraq

The Camp David accords threatened both Syria and Iraq with isolation if Sadat managed to draw the rest of the Arab world after him. In the face of this common danger the two countries joined forces to prevent Saudi Arabia and Jordan from joining the peace process. Reversing its earlier policy of decrying Asad, Iraq appealed to him on 1 October to attend an Arab summit in Baghdad to decide what to do about Egypt.

A wary dialogue followed. Tariq 'Aziz, a leading member of Iraq's Revolutionary Command Council, came twice to Damascus to warm up relations between the two warring wings of the Ba'th party. 'Aziz was well-known in Syria since he had taken refuge there after the

overthrow of the Iraqi Ba'th in 1963 and had worked on the party newspaper. At a dinner given for him by veteran Ba'thist Mansur al-Atrash, it seemed as if the gory schism of 1966 could be bridged. Asad's faithful aide Mustafa Tlas was there, as was Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad, Syria's dynamic Information Minister.[41] A truce was called between two Arab regimes which had hated one another for a decade and more.

The entente was sealed by Asad himself on a three-day visit to Baghdad on 24–26 October 1978 when he made it up with President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr and with Iraq's rising star, the formidable Saddam Husayn. At this meeting of old enemies, Ba'thist pan-Arab dogmas were duly paraded. A Charter for Joint National Action was signed, hailed as ushering in an 'important qualitative change in relations' between Syria and Iraq – a euphemism for an end to plotting and killing. When men have drunk from the same doctrinal fount they speak a common language which turns easily to sanctimoniousness: 'I would rather be a private soldier in a united Arab world than a general in a secessionist state', Asad told his hosts. 'My brothers, I have no personal ambition to satisfy: it is the same to me if our capital is Basra or Mosul or Homs.' But he added a word of caution. 'The road to union between us is not carpeted with flowers.'[42]

Within a week Asad was back in Iraq for the Baghdad summit of 2–5 November called to condemn Egypt and attended by every other member of the Arab League. As a warning to Sadat to go no further, sanctions were agreed in the event of Egypt's signing a peace treaty. Meanwhile, it was decided to suspend further meetings of the League Council in Cairo and to set up a support fund for front-line states: Syria was promised $1.8 billion a year for ten years, Jordan $1.2 billion, the PLO $150 million, the occupied territories another $150 million, and Lebanon $100 million – promises only partially kept and which were later to lead to much wrangling. In an eleventh-hour bid to draw Egypt back from the brink, a delegation was sent to Cairo to offer Sadat $5 billion a year for ten years, or so it was rumoured, if he renounced Camp David. Sadat refused to receive the envoys.

The reconciliation between Iraq and Syria set Israeli planners totting up Syrian and Iraqi tank forces. They need not have worried. For Asad and Saddam Husayn the important achievement of their new alliance was that it forced the Saudis, privately reluctant to censure Egypt or antagonize Washington, to fall into line behind them. Camp David was checked and Sadat denied the Pied Piper role of which he had dreamed. When on 26 March 1979 he signed his lonely treaty with Israel, he was immediately punished: relations were broken off, Egypt was expelled

from the Arab League and the League's headquarters were moved out of Cairo where they had been since 1945. A short while later Egypt was suspended from the Islamic Conference Organization. Sadat had become an outcast.

Forged to bring about these results, the Syrian-Iraqi tactical alliance survived a few more weeks. In January 1979 Saddam Husayn paid a visit to Damascus and Asad made a return trip to Baghdad in June – but almost immediately thereafter relations reverted to the familiar pattern of intrigue and subversion.

Stocktaking

Camp David and the peace treaty transformed Israel's strategic environment. Always more than a match for all the Arabs combined, Israel had now neutralized the largest and most powerful Arab state and had become wholly unchallengeable. Freed from the threat of a two-front war, it faced no pressure to solve the Palestine problem nor to heed the angry clamour from Syria and other Arab states. To those who regarded peace between Egypt and Israel as a welcome breakthrough, Asad's fears were simply not comprehensible. Far from correcting Kissinger's work President Carter had ended up completing it. And just as Sinai Two had cost the American taxpayer billions of dollars, so Carter now pledged further billions to secure the peace treaty, paying Israel to do what it desperately wanted to do anyhow. 'We bought the sands of the Sinai for an exorbitant price from Israel, then paid Egypt a large price to take them back', was the sardonic summing up of the veteran American statesman George Ball.[43] There was a failure to grasp how the achievement of Israeli objectives since the October War, abetted by Kissinger and acquiesced in by Carter, had broken the Arab system and ensured Israeli supremacy. (For example, in September 1978 while the Camp David talks were in progress, Asad on a state visit to West Germany seized the occasion of a banquet in Bonn to attack Sadat's policies: to his dismay President Walter Scheel made an impromptu reply registering dissent.) But the incomprehension was not only in the West. Among some Arab leaders there was also a good deal of confusion about the significance of Sadat's initiative. Anxious to bring the Saudis in on his side, Sadat sent Nasser's son-in-law, Ashraf Marwan, to explain to King Khalid why he had gone to Jerusalem. To the envoy's surprise, the pious king seemed unconcerned about the political or strategic consequences: his objections were solely religious.[44]

> Why did Sadat have to go to the holy city of Jerusalem? He could have met Begin anywhere in the world. And why did he have to go on 'Id al-Adha [the feast-day closing the pilgrimage season] when all good Muslims should be turning their thoughts to Mecca?

As time passed it came to be seen that Sadat's journey to Jerusalem was less a historic breakthrough towards peace than a fracture in the peace process, which over a decade later had not been repaired.

19

The Enemy Within

Just when Asad was facing defeat in his long struggle against Israel and the United States, his home base blew up in his face. The chain of external events which was so catastrophic for him, from Sadat's visit to Jerusalem to the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, coincided with an internal terror campaign of unparalleled ferocity. The removal of Egypt from the Arab line-up had left Syria especially vulnerable externally, and it was at precisely this moment that the country was engulfed in violence. Inevitably, when everything he had fought for – indeed his life itself – was at risk, Asad came to see himself as the victim of a great conspiracy in which his enemies at home and abroad had joined forces to bring him down. In 1977 he was in a situation not unlike that of Nasser in 1967: stripped of defences, driven into a corner, and brooding over the sombre conclusion that the West in collusion with Israel and his Arab opponents was out to destroy him.

One of the worst outrages occurred on 16 June 1979 when terrorists slaughtered large numbers of 'Alawi officer cadets at the Aleppo Artillery School. A member of staff, Captain Ibrahim Yusuf, assembled the cadets in the dining-hall and then let in the gunmen who opened fire indiscriminately. Thirty-two young men were killed outright according to the official report,[1] and another fifty-four wounded, but other sources say the death toll was as high as eighty-three.[2] It was a declaration of war.

Hit-and-run terrorism had jolted Syrian city life since Asad's intervention in Lebanon in the summer of 1976, but there had been nothing on the scale of the Aleppo massacre. Rather the pattern had been one of random explosions and assassinations, somewhat mystifying to public opinion as no one could be sure who was behind them. Some of the victims were prominent officers and government servants but others were professional men, doctors, teachers and the like, who were not involved with the regime and were therefore undefended.

Most of them were 'Alawis which suggested that the assassins had targeted the community and were deliberately setting out to sharpen sectarian differences, and in this they were successful. Every 'Alawi came to feel he was a potential target and the community as a whole trembled.

Among the two or three dozen victims in the years before the outrage at the Artillery School, the better known were the commander of the Hama garrison, Colonel 'Ali Haydar, killed in October 1976; the rector of Damascus University, Dr Muhammad al-Fadl, killed in February 1977; the commander of the missile corps, Brigadier 'Abd al-Hamid Ruzzuq, killed in June 1977; Professor 'Ali Ibn 'Abid al-'Ali of Aleppo University, killed in November 1977; the doyen of Syrian dentists, Dr Ibrahim Na'ama, killed in March 1978; the director of police affairs at the Ministry of the Interior, Colonel Ahmad Khalil, killed in August 1978; and Public Prosecutor 'Adil Mini of the Supreme State Security Court, killed in April 1979. Asad's own doctor, the neurologist Dr Muhammad Shahada Khalil, was attacked in August 1979. It was shocking and wounding to Asad that some of the best and brightest men of the society he was fashioning, especially professional men from his own community, were falling to the assassins.

The economic boom

These acts of terror did not erupt in a vacuum. They were the most extreme expression of a general malaise spreading through Syrian society as Asad's Corrective Movement, welcomed with relief at the beginning of the decade, began to look tarnished. Not only had the economic boom which followed the October War run out of steam, but new inequalities had been created, in many ways as flagrant as those which the Ba'th revolution of the 1960s had sought to correct. A lucky few with access to the government cornucopia were acquiring vast wealth, fortunes such as Syrians had never known before, and thereby arousing the fierce resentment of all those without such access. The ruling Ba'th party as well as the higher echelons of the military and the government were packed with careerists and profiteers, and Asad himself, once so popular, was beginning to be viewed more critically. People complained that his preoccupation with foreign affairs had led him to neglect the domestic scene and to turn a blind eye to the abuses of some of his associates. There was a sense that the hero who had fought the October War, waged the battle against Camp David and given Syria international stature was now heading for trouble. Asad in 1977–8 looked weak indeed.

Yet he had accomplished a great deal at home in the 1970s. The country had been transformed in almost every statistic. Stability and relative freedom, combined with the vast inflow of capital after the October War, had resulted in unprecedented economic expansion. Before the war foreign aid, mainly from Arab and socialist countries, had barely totalled $50 million a year; in 1974 it leaped to an annual average of $600 million.[3] The Arab oil producers were the big donors, but as international confidence in Syria grew loans and grants came in from the United Nations, the World Bank, West Germany, France, and even the United States. Syrians working in Arab oil countries, now awash with funds following the oil price explosion, started to remit several hundred million dollars a year, while Syria's own oil exports, which had brought in a mere $70 million in 1973, rocketed to ten times that sum in 1974, for the first time outstripping revenues from cotton, the country's traditional export earner.

The boom years widened Syria's horizons, as could be seen in the increasingly ambitious targets of the five-year plans. The first plan, 1961–5, envisaged total investment, both public and private, of about $600 million in local currency, and the second, 1966–70, increased this to $1.2 billion. But after Asad came to power the third plan, 1971–5, provided for investment of $2 billion, rising in the fourth plan, 1976–80, drafted in the full euphoria of the boom, to $13.5 billion – about 54 billion Syrian *lire*, an astronomical figure by Syrian standards and reflecting the excitement of the times.[4] The affluent years released a dynamism in Syrian society which made it a very different place from the poor, inward-looking, over-controlled country which Asad had taken over from Salah Jadid. There were by the mid-1970s twice as many Syrians, 7.5 million of them, as when Asad graduated from the air force academy twenty years earlier, and the armed services, the bedrock of his regime, had grown to over 225,000. Undoubtedly the new numbers and the new prosperity contributed to the robustness with which Asad had risen to meet the challenges of Sadat, Kissinger, Nixon and Carter.

As Syrian budgets swelled, development projects proliferated and consumption soared – at least for some. In 1963 there were only 55 millionaires in Syria – millionaires, that is, in Syrian *lire*; in 1973 there were 1,000; in 1976, 3,500, of whom 10 per cent owned more than 100 million Syrian *lire* each (about $25 million at the exchange rate of the time).[5] Instant millionaires constituted the core of a new bourgeoisie, many enriched by commissions, kickbacks and even theft made possible by the dozens of government-financed projects. Before the October War government and business had been largely separate, interacting perhaps but not interpenetrating. After the war it was hard to say where the sphere of government stopped and that of business took over, so intertwined had they grown. It became virtually impossible to do deals of any size without government connections and handouts to officials. Partnerships grew up between businessmen and the military and political barons of the regime, spawning networks of patronage, corruption and cronyism. All too often, by submitting projects to the government and pushing them through without adequate study, middlemen rather than government planners determined the shape of the economy, with the motor being the lure of private gain rather than the public interest.

It was in this period, 1974–6, that such prominent people as the Vice-premier for Economic Affairs, Muhammad Haydar ('Mister Five Per Cent'), began to amass considerable wealth. Haydar was seen as the archetype of the startling improvement in 'Alawi fortunes resulting from the community's political ascent. His native village of Bayt Yashut high in the 'Alawi mountains was in his youth ten kilometres from the nearest made-up road and lived, without school, hospital or government authority, on tobacco smuggling and the pay of a handful of boys in the army. In the 1950s the local Ba'th party, of which Haydar became secretary, press-ganged young men to build a track linking the village to the outside world. Haydar rose in the party, was elected to the Regional and National Commands, and then for several years lorded it over the Syrian economy, in which position he was well placed to look after himself.

Others on the way to becoming super-rich included Asad's brother-in-law Muhammad Makhluf and his youngest brother Rif'at, who in those affluent years travelled abroad, explored foreign capitals, acquired a taste for Western luxuries and made contact on equal terms with other top people in the region. It was a time when Syrians, and especially once underprivileged minorities and classes, broke out of the straitjacket of poverty and rural parochialism to glimpse that they and their country could join the modern world.

At this time Rif'at, self-consciously the shield of his brother's regime, built up his Defence Companies, turning them into the best armed, best trained and best paid units in the Syrian army. In financing and equipping this praetorian guard, Rif'at put to good use his friendship with Prince 'Abdallah ibn Sa'ud, the commander of the Saudi National Guard. Military matters were not his only interest. At the party's Sixth Regional Congress of April 1975 he was elected to the Regional Command and given responsibility for youth affairs, whereupon he enthusiastically set about pushing young people,

particularly 'Alawis, into university courses and into parachute training, girls as well as boys. To be Asad's brother, to have access to large and unaudited budgets, and to be operating in an Arab environment where personal contacts were all-important was to be able to do almost anything one liked, and Rif'at was at times above the law.

For the first time since the Ba'th takeover in 1963, Asad and the ruling group of officers and party functionaries, overwhelmingly from country or small town backgrounds, stood on a foundation of real wealth. They were no longer mere putchists, nor simply a junta of ex-peasant officers who had captured the city. Money, economic development, a strong leader, the raising up of neglected classes and not just the 'Alawi element in them, all these seemed to be consolidating Asad's regime. The new class in the making was building a new Syria – but it was also indulging in city comforts, enjoying perks and abusing its new-found powers. Before the boom hardly any of the newcomers had owned a car or lived in anything grander than a two-bedroom apartment, but now they took to wealth and luxury as to the manner born. In 1960 Damascus had been a quiet town of around half a million people; by the mid-1970s its population had tripled and it was a thriving building-site bursting at the seams. The benefits of prosperity were even beginning to take the edge off the resentments of the old families who had been shunted aside by the revolutionary upstarts. For a moment, and until the Lebanese crisis of mid-1976, Ba'th rule had never seemed more stable.

The Muslim opposition

By 1976–7, however, shadows were beginning to darken the edges of the picture. The Syrian economy lost momentum as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, bowing to public outrage at Asad's assault on the Palestinians in Lebanon, reduced the petro-dollar flow. Keeping a large expeditionary force abroad was a burden, as was the daunting task of absorbing into Syria hundreds of thousands of Lebanese refugees, not to mention Syrian expatriate workers fleeing the civil war. Not everyone benefited from the fat years. The rough influx of peasants into the cities disquieted the urban lower middle classes, while inflation brought new hardships to lowly civil servants and to artisans on subsistence wages. There was an explosion in the cost of living and in land and property values. A small apartment in central Damascus, which might have cost 50,000 *lire* in 1970, had by 1977 increased

seven or eight times in value (and was to increase a further ten-fold in the next decade). Workers were forced out to mean rooms in outlying villages which were themselves being sucked into the expanding metropolis. Men whose self-esteem was rooted in the old quarters of the cities where life had not changed for generations found themselves devalued and uprooted. Children of old notable families stripped of political influence, merchants outclassed by new money, religious families downgraded by the secular climate of the times all seethed with resentment.

Asad may not have grasped how much discontent was created by the dramatic changes of those years and by the upsets to the social order resulting from the Ba'th's revolution which had hoisted some to the skies and brought others low. To deal with a groundswell of complaint about corruption and unfairness, he brought back as prime minister in August 1976 the well-liked army administrator General Khulayfawi who had been his first premier. But this did not stem the increasingly vocal grumbles about ill-gotten gains inside and outside government. The have-nots were beginning to stir. In response Asad announced in August 1977 the formation of a 'Committee for the Investigation of Illegal Profits', which began vigorously enough by arresting a score of top businessmen and government servants but then backed away when it found itself tangling with personalities close to the regime. Asad's brother Rif'at, a prime example of private enrichment, could not be touched because he was at the pinnacle of the pyramid and because his Defence Companies were by this time increasingly needed in the battle against the terrorists.

When the assassinations started the government blamed them on the old enemy Iraq, and the fact that a six-month lull in the killings followed Asad's truce with Baghdad in October 1978 seemed to lend credence to the allegation. But the Aleppo massacre of June 1979 changed the picture. It was now evident that, whatever external forces were at work – and neighbouring countries certainly lent a hand – Asad had to recognize that he faced a dangerous internal opposition which would stop at nothing to overthrow him. It seemed to him a bitter irony that, having consciously tried to soften the class warfare of his predecessors and preach national reconciliation, he yet had to wrestle with domestic enemies more ferocious than any which had confronted Salah Jadid. It seemed that, whatever benefits he brought, his enemies would not disarm.

As the violence became an almost daily worry, the authorities identified the terrorists as 'the Muslim Brothers', a blanket phrase they were to use throughout the five-year crisis to describe the Muslim or

Muslim-spearheaded opposition which manifested itself in a variety of guerrilla groups with different leaders and histories and operating in different parts of Syria. The movement of dissent was wider than the guerrillas, but they were the sharp end of the grave internal challenge Asad faced from 1977 to 1982.

From his youth he had come up against the Muslim Brothers, engaging them in fist fights in the schoolyard in Latakia. In fact, a current of organized Muslim activism had existed in Syrian public life since the 1930s. Pockets of Islamic resistance to French rule had sprung up in several Syrian cities in the latter part of that decade. Paradoxically it was the French who in 1938 caused these isolated groups[6] to merge by insisting on discussing the then contentious issue of Islamic teaching in schools with a single nation-wide organization. This had provided the impetus for the birth of the *Shabab Muhammad* (Young Men of Muhammad).[7]

Just at this time a young Syrian, Mustafa al-Siba'i, returned home to Damascus from studies in Cairo where he had fallen under the spell of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna, who from small beginnings in 1928 had built up a vast popular movement in Egypt dedicated to ending British rule and replacing it by an Islamic state. Egyptian ferment spilled over into other Arab countries and, with Siba'i's help, into Syria. Taking in hand the *Shabab Muhammad*, Siba'i linked them to the Egyptian Muslim Brothers and by 1949 had forged a political force strong enough to send him to parliament in Damascus. From then on, political Islam remained a sturdy actor on the Syrian scene, as Asad discovered as a schoolboy, but neither powerful enough to dominate nor so weak as to be stamped out. It was a sort of fever that rose and fell according to conditions at home and manipulation from abroad.

The rise to prominence of the Ba'th from 1955 onwards was a bitter blow to Muslim activists, who grew angry and restive as traditional Sunni society was overturned by secular radicals. When the Ba'th captured the state in 1963, small bands of Islamic militants went underground in Aleppo and Hama to organize armed resistance. For example, in Aleppo in 1963 Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman Abu Ghidda founded a clandestine Movement of Islamic Liberation, and in Hama in 1965 Marwan Hadid – a long-time activist who, it will be recalled, had been briefly jailed for taking part in the 1964 armed rising against the Ba'th – began recruiting a secret strike force which he called *Kata'ib Muhammad* (Phalanxes of Muhammad). Absorbed by its own party infighting, the Ba'th in those years did not detect that Islamic militants were forming cells, stockpiling weapons, adopting *noms de guerre*, making foreign contacts and training their cadres in urban warfare. By drafting large numbers of Ba'thist schoolteachers into government service after the 1963 revolution, the Ba'th had itself given the Muslim Brotherhood a chance to implant itself in the schools and influence the young.

Mosque study circles where boys went in the holidays to study Arabic and the Quran became places of recruitment for the terrorists. A potential recruit would be asked to hide a weapon, then to return it, then to take it again and learn to strip and assemble it. The next stage might be to involve him in the surveillance of a Ba'th party official or the reconnoitring of a government building. 'Now you are one of us', his Islamic mentor would say. 'Your neck is on the block like ours.' A brutal method used to harden young men was to get them to gun down unprotected workers like street-sweepers who because of their job had to be out early. Several were killed in this way.[8]

Not all Muslim political activity was underground. The leading light of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brothers was 'Isam al-'Attar, an outspoken critic of the Ba'th who, not being allowed to return to Syria after making the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964, set up headquarters at Aachen in West Germany whence from 1968 onwards he waged a war of words against Damascus in his magazine, *al-Ra'id* (The Guide). More abusive was another Muslim newssheet, *al-Nadhir* (The Warner), which reflected the views of the guerrilla groups inside Syria. Money and supplies were channelled in through international networks such as the Federation of Muslim Students in Europe, run from 'Attar's Aachen base and from branches of the Brotherhood in neighbouring countries, notably Jordan.

The outbreak of terror

Asad's domestic troubles in 1977–8, and the growing importance of Rif'at, produced the first serious rift in the regime's power elite. Major-General Naji Jamil, a Sunni from Dayr al-Zur, had been Asad's friend and companion since their early flying days. He played a role in the 1963 coup, accompanied Asad to London in 1965, and took over from him as head of the air force in 1970. By 1978 he was also deputy defence minister and head of the Bureau of State Security. As intelligence supremo he was perhaps the major prop of the regime. Quite suddenly in March 1978 Jamil fell from grace and was sent into discreet retirement (although he retained a seat on the party's National Command, a purely face-saving appointment). Jamil was replaced in

the key state security job by another of Asad's close associates who had made his career in air force intelligence, the 'Alawi officer, Major-General Muhammad al-Khuly.

Jamil's fall appears to have been triggered by three factors: the most obvious was the deteriorating security situation with which he was failing to cope; more particularly, the stresses of the times brought him up against Rif'at who aspired to be in sole charge of anti-terrorist operations; but Jamil's fatal error was to express disrespect for Asad in the inner councils of the regime. It was rumoured that he had dared to hint that, having made Asad, they could unmake him. He seemed to be challenging the ascendancy which Asad, though now beleaguered, had acquired over the group of men with whom he came to power. Jamil paid the price. His successors were soon to have their hands full.

Early in the terrorist campaign the opposition acquired a martyr in the person of the Hama fanatic, Marwan Hadid, who had been fighting the Ba'th in one way or another since his campus days in Cairo in the 1950s and who was now the imam or prayer leader of the Barudiya mosque where he delivered anti-Ba'th sermons. Of Albanian origin, the Hadid family were merchants, one of whose sons, Marwan, was a Muslim Brother, another, 'Adnan, a Communist, and a third, Kan'an, a Ba'thist – illustrating the classic fault-lines in Syrian political life. Arrested in 1976 and jailed, Marwan went on hunger strike. Asad sent Kan'an, then a Syrian diplomat in Tehran, to try to persuade him to break his fast, but to no avail.[9] Marwan died in June 1976 in the Harasta military hospital east of Damascus, immediately becoming a source of inspiration for his followers who vowed to avenge him. But it was to be another three years before the Artillery School massacre of June 1979 marked the start of full-scale urban warfare against 'Alawis, against Ba'th party officials, party offices, police posts, military vehicles, barracks, factories and any other target the guerrillas could attack. Russian technicians in Syria were also not spared: ten were killed or wounded in a rash of incidents in January 1980.

From mid-1979 to mid-1980 the underground held the initiative and Asad seemed in greatest danger. From their safe haven deep in the ancient warrens of northern cities like Aleppo and Hama where cars could not enter, the guerrillas emerged to bomb and kill. They set fire to buildings, closed shops, whipped up anti-government demonstrations and strove to control the streets. When cornered, they often blew themselves up with grenades strapped round their waists. They sent hit teams to kill party members in their beds, such as 'Abd al-'Aziz al-'Adi, a member of the Hama party leadership who was murdered in front of his wife and children and his body thrown into the street. The Hama

party secretary, Ahmad al-As'ad, had several narrow escapes, in one of which a grenade rolled by a terrorist down the pavement towards his front door was providentially trapped in a pile of jasmine clippings left by a neighbour after an evening's pruning.[10] Gunmen twice attacked his house at night but were fought off. Other Ba'thists had a similar tale to tell, among them 'Ali Badawi, a member of the Aleppo governor's executive council. In June 1980 his house was besieged by guerrillas who killed one of his brothers. Another, shot in the stomach, was saved when a British surgeon transplanted a kidney from Badawi's sixteen year-old sister.[11]

Such incidents illustrated the trials party workers suffered in those years. In Aleppo between 1979 and 1981 terrorists killed over 300 people,[12] mainly Ba'thists and 'Alawis but including a dozen Islamic clergy who had denounced the murders. Of these the most prominent was Shaykh Muhammad al-Shami slain in his own mosque, the Sulaymaniya, on 2 February 1980. This was the climax of an extremely violent few weeks which opened with the arrest in November 1979 of the prayer leader of Aleppo's Great Mosque, Shaykh Zayn al-Din Khayrallah, an event which provoked massive demonstrations, numerous assassinations and the boycott, on orders of the Muslim Brothers, of the feast of al-Adha which ends the pilgrimage season. Khayrallah's son-in-law, Husni 'Abo, turned out to be the underground's military commander in the Aleppo region. He was seized, brought to trial and executed. He was succeeded as commander of the *Tali'a al-muqatila* (Fighting Vanguard), one of the most effective of the guerrilla groups, by a young engineer from Qunaytra, 'Adnan 'Uqla, who had helped plan the massacre of the Aleppo cadets[13] and who was to die in turn in 1982. Several terrorist leaders arose in those terrible times, only to be hunted down. As against their 300 victims must be set a toll of some 2,000 Muslim opponents killed by the security forces in Aleppo, as well as thousands more rounded up and thrown into jail where they were often beaten and tortured.

In March 1980, having failed to bring down the government by assassinations, the Muslim Brothers tried the bolder strategy of swamping it with large-scale urban uprisings. By intimidating shop-keepers, they got the business quarter of Aleppo to shut down for two weeks. Open defiance spread to Hama, Homs, Idlib, Dayr al-Zur and even to the distant town of Hasaka beyond the Euphrates. Would Damascus, Asad's capital, follow the trend? Anonymous leaflets circulated calling on merchants in the Hamidiyah, the capital's principal bazaar, to close in solidarity with the northern cities. At this critical juncture when the government seemed in imminent danger of

losing control Asad found an ally in Badr al-Din al-Shallah, the influential chairman of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, a patriarch in his eighties who rallied prominent shopkeepers and urged them to stay open, turning the tide in favour of the regime.[14] Damascus merchants had benefited more than their colleagues in other cities from the new wealth of the 1970s. Their proximity to the centre of power gave them opportunities for contacts and alliances with officers and officials of the regime to everyone's mutual benefit. Asad had learned from Jadid's difficulties that to give his regime a stable base he must conciliate, or at least not wholly alienate, the Damascus commercial class. This policy now paid off. His greater liking for Damascus than for Aleppo or Hama dated from this moment of averted danger.

Bloodthirsty retribution

Between 1977 and early 1980 Asad seemed slow to react to the internal crisis, as if reluctant to admit that profound fissures existed in his society. To some extent his natural caution may have been responsible for what looked almost like passivity, but it was also difficult for him to admit that his efforts to unite the country around his person had not merely failed but were collapsing into virtual civil war. The man who on coming to power had disciplined the arbitrary security services and tried to restore confidence in the rule of law now found himself under pressure to resort to the most savage methods simply to stay afloat. The conciliator was under force of circumstance turning into a despot, and it was not a transformation that Asad enjoyed.

In January 1980 as the crisis deepened Asad appointed a new prime minister, Dr 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Kasm, a city planner and university professor who had served for a brief spell as governor of Damascus City and who had a reputation for honesty. He was the son of a Damascene religious figure, a *mufti*, and was a student acquaintance of Asad. Kasm increased the salaries of state employees, made a further attempt to crack down on corruption and allowed some measure of public criticism. Yet the violence continued, stimulating an anguished debate inside the party about the causes of the revolt. Where had the party gone wrong? Who was to blame? Was terrorism a response to corruption or did its roots lie deeper? Had mass recruitment allowed unprincipled elements to infiltrate the party? There was great alarm at the top when it was discovered that air force intelligence, run by Asad's

new security supremo, General Muhammad al-Khuly, had harboured an agent of the Islamic underground who before his capture and execution leaked to the Muslim Brothers the car registration numbers of most of the state's top intelligence officers.

A tougher mood prevailed at the party's Seventh Regional Congress (23 December 1979–6 January 1980) when Asad's forceful younger brother Rif'at led a drive to wage all-out war against the terrorists. The government was losing control, he argued; the bureaucracy was corrupt and the party torn by useless ideological debate; citizens showed no sense of responsibility. What was demanded was absolute loyalty: those who were not with the regime must now be considered against it. The Ba'thist state had to be defended, in blood if necessary. Stalin had sacrificed ten million to preserve the Bolshevik revolution and Syria should be prepared to do likewise.[15] He asked for a free hand. Seeing that the Islamic terrorists had sworn to kill every infidel, he pledged his readiness to fight 'a hundred wars, demolish a million strongholds, and sacrifice a million martyrs'.[16] It was not a programme inviting restraint. The Congress marked the rise of Rif'at to a position second only to Asad's in the state. The iron-fist methods he put into practice probably saved the regime, but also changed its character.

Resolving to match the brutality of their enemies, the authorities now made more use of military units equipped with heavy weapons to root out urban guerrillas. But the real innovation was the arming of the party and its sympathizers. In every city, citizen militias were formed and weapons distributed to Ba'th-affiliated Popular Organizations. The neutrality of the street had earlier given the insurgents an advantage, but now, as the population was pressed to choose between fighting for or against the government, many chose the government side, less perhaps out of conviction than from exasperation with the disruptions – the strikes in the souk, the bombs in schools and supermarkets, and the constant fear of death.

On 9 March helicopter-borne troops were sent against Jisr al-Shughur, a town between Aleppo and Latakia where demonstrators had attacked barracks and party offices. A ferocious search-and-destroy operation left some two hundred dead. Scores of prisoners were hauled before field tribunals. A few days later the entire Third Division, some 10,000 men and 250 armoured vehicles, was sent north to bring Aleppo in line. It was joined by men of Rif'at's Defence Companies. After parleying failed to restore order, the troops were sent in at the beginning of April to seal off whole quarters and carry out house-to-house searches, often preceded by tank-fire. Hundreds of suspects were rounded up and carried away. Standing in the turret of

his tank, the divisional commander, General Shafiq Fayadh, told the townspeople that he was prepared to kill a thousand men a day to rid the city of the vermin of the Muslim Brothers. His division stayed in Aleppo for a whole year, with a tank in almost every street. In Aleppo as elsewhere the military were backed up by armed party irregulars. According to Anwar Ahmadov, a Soviet consul who lived through the Aleppo crisis, 'It would have been a very different story if the population, who were by this time sick of violence, had not co-operated with the authorities and informed on the Islamic guerrillas'.[17] Hama experienced much the same cycle of terrorism and repression in the years before the great showdown in 1982.

At last in the spring of 1980 Asad threw himself into the fray. He seemed to free himself from the distaste for contact with the crowd which with the passing years was becoming more pronounced, from that undoubted reserve which even at the height of his acclaim had caused him to be something less than a populist leader. Hitherto his speeches, delivered on predictable occasions such as the anniversary of the revolution or the opening of parliament, tended to be reasoned and literary discourses. But now an orator appeared, theatrical in his anger and defiance, able to set large audiences alight and to do so night after night. On 8 March 1980, the revolution's seventeenth anniversary, Asad made a ringing declaration of Islamic faith, clearly hoping to steal the opposition's clothes:[18]

> Yes! I believe in God and in the message of Islam . . . I was, I am and I will remain a Muslim, just as Syria will remain a proud citadel flying high the flag of Islam! But the enemies of Islam who traffic in religion will be swept away!

Against all precedent he harangued the nation again on the 10th, 11th, 17th, 22nd, 23rd, 24th and on into April at clamorous, overheated congresses of the various Popular Organizations – of workers, peasants, craftsmen, youth, women, teachers, writers, students, sportsmen. Preaching the use of 'armed revolutionary violence' against the 'reactionary violence' of the guerrillas, he brought tens of thousands of young men and women cheering to their feet.[19] Lukewarm about 'revolutionary violence', the Syrian Bar Association and the federations of doctors and engineers were dissolved and their officers taken into custody, some never to reappear.

On 26 June 1980 Asad, now himself at the forefront of the battle, narrowly escaped death at the hands of his Islamic opponents. Terrorists threw two grenades and fired machine gun bursts at him as

he waited to welcome an African visitor at the gate of the Guest Palace. He kicked one grenade out of harm's way while a guard threw himself on the other and was killed instantly. Asad's personal bodyguard, Khalid al-Husayn, thrust the president to the ground and shielded him with his body.

A wave of fury swept through the 'Alawi community, and with it a thirst for revenge. Asad's brother Rif'at vowed to raze Damascus. 'Why do they want to kill us? We can kill too!' was the mood. Deflected from the capital, he spent his fury elsewhere. At 3 o'clock the next morning, 27 June, two units of Rif'at's Defence Companies were wakened and told to assemble in combat dress. Briefed by Major Mu'in Nasif, Rif'at's deputy and son-in-law, they were told that their mission was to attack a prison in Palmyra, deep in the desert, where Muslim Brothers were being held. The men were trucked to Mezze airport and flown in ten helicopters to Palmyra. At 6.30 a.m. half the force, about sixty men, were driven to the desert prison, split up into six or seven squads and let loose on the prison dormitories with orders to kill everyone inside. Some five hundred inmates died in cells echoing to the fearful din of automatic weapons, exploding grenades, and dying shrieks of 'God is great!'[20] In an attempt to pull a veil of legality over the massacre, it was later said that the prisoners had been condemned to death by a field tribunal with emergency powers. In any event, the war went on. On 8 July membership of the Muslim Brothers became a capital offence, although a grace period of a month was given to those who wished to give themselves up. Hundreds of the smaller fry came forward, but the hard core remained unmoved.

Particularly bloody retribution for further terrorist acts was wreaked on Aleppo in August 1980 and on Hama the following April when scores of males over the age of fourteen were rounded up almost at random and shot out of hand.[21] The drive to silence opponents spilled across frontiers. Syrian commandos raided a Muslim Brothers' training camp in Jordan in late July 1980. Hostile journalists in Lebanon were killed: Salim al-Lawzi, publisher of *al-Hawadith*, in March, and Riad Taha, head of the journalists' union in Beirut, in July. The following year, in March 1981, assassins went looking as far afield as Aachen for the Muslim Brothers' 'guide', 'Isam al-'Attar, killing his wife, Bayan al-Tantawi, when she opened the front door. But the murder which caused the greatest disquiet was that of the veteran Ba'thist leader, Salah al-Din Bitar, in Paris on 21 July 1980. The Syrian hand behind these killings was not proved but was widely suspected.

Co-founder of the party with Michel 'Aflaq, Bitar belonged to the civilian Ba'thist generation ousted by the Military Committee's coup of

1966. Condemned to death *in absentia* in 1969, he had been pardoned by Asad in 1970 and had returned briefly to Syria in an attempt at a reconciliation. Asad no doubt hoped he would settle in Damascus as a counterweight to 'Aflaq in Baghdad. But five hours of talks in January 1978 failed to heal the breach between them. Returning to his Paris exile Bitar, aided by some Gulf money, published a periodical called *al-Ihya' al-'Arabi* (Arab Revival), an echo of the name he and 'Aflaq had first given their little knot of disciples in the 1940s. In its columns he campaigned for democratic freedoms and human rights in Syria. For example, in February 1980 he published the Syrian Bar Association's demand for the restoration of the rule of law. He also harped woundingly on the sectarian, in other words 'Alawi, basis of the regime, a crime in the eyes of Damascus. It was rumoured that he was pressing the Saudis to cut off aid to Syria. Worse still, he was said to have made contact with Asad's foes in Baghdad, with Akram al-Hawrani, with General Amin al-Hafiz, the soldier who had fronted for the Military Committee until 1966, with Hammud al-Shufi, a former Syrian ambassador to the United Nations who had broken with the regime in 1979, and with other fading names from the past, becoming a rallying point for widely different strands of the Syrian opposition. For a moment it must have seemed that Bitar could present a real danger and some such fear may have contributed to the decision to put an end to him. After his death his widow, Malak, took his body for burial to Baghdad where among Asad's bitter enemies she herself sought refuge.

Men like Bitar probably posed no physical threat to Asad but their criticisms touched a raw nerve, because they were directed at sensitive areas where he seemed to depart from Arab nationalist orthodoxy. Bitar and others like him charged Asad with ambivalence regarding American peace plans: had he not negotiated a Golan disengagement with Kissinger? And was this not, after all, the opening which had allowed Sadat to conclude his separate peace? How could he claim to champion the Palestine cause while crushing the PLO? Was not his 'army of occupation' in Lebanon implementing a tacit agreement with Israel to divide the country between them? Did he not bear some responsibility for the estrangement with Egypt and for the collapse of the entente with Iraq? These were just the accusations which all those who did not understand Asad's policies, or did not wish to understand them, commonly made. He could make reasoned answers to do with the overriding need to hold Israel in check, defend his corner, yet seek an honourable peace or live to fight another day. But he remained exposed to the shafts of unconvinced critics.

Asad's long war with the Islamic underground was approaching its denouement. In the autumn of 1980 his enemies regrouped for yet another campaign. Assassinations of prominent men were resumed, and Asad lost two friends, a heart specialist, Dr Yusuf Sayigh, and a National Progressive Front leader, Darwish al-Zuni, both killed in December 1980. At the same time the formation of an 'Islamic Front' was announced, which in a seductively phrased manifesto attempted to group the opposition within a single anti-Asad National Alliance. The Front promised free speech, free elections, an independent judiciary, land reform, and much else, under the banner of Islam. It was led from a base outside the Middle East by a three-man high command: 'Adnan Sa'd al-Din originally from Homs, Muhammad al-Bayanuni[22] from Aleppo, and the Hama-born pamphleteer Sa'id Hawwa. Alarming to Asad was the publicity these men won in Arab countries and in the West and the support they appeared to be getting from sympathizers in Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic Front's biggest success was to carry the terrorist war to Damascus itself. Eluding the security forces, the guerrillas exploded a car bomb outside the prime minister's office in August 1981, another outside air force headquarters in September, a third outside a Soviet experts' centre in October, and in their bloodiest operation yet killed and wounded hundreds of passers-by on 29 November with a massive explosion in the Azbakiya district of central Damascus where a complex of intelligence agencies was located. Stiff with troops, the city was turned into an armed camp. Checkpoints were everywhere, body searches became routine. Private and family life was much disturbed and when terrorists set fire to government food stores, as they often did, it was not easy to fill the larder. Hardly anyone dared stir after dark and even during the day few party members ventured out on foot. Some even stayed away from work until warned that they risked expulsion from the party. Asad was little seen in those months. When on his fifty-first birthday, 6 October 1981, Islamic terrorists in Egypt killed Anwar al-Sadat, leaflets in Damascus threatened him with the same fate. In 1976 Asad had acquired his first armoured Cadillac, now he became one of the best guarded men in the world. But his family did their utmost to live a normal life. As Basil, aged nineteen in 1981, recalled:[23]

> Because of the random killing people advised me not to go out but I felt I could defend myself. All of us children were convinced that if anything should happen to one of us, it would have no political impact on our father.

The Hama uprising

Hama, the conservative city in the central Syrian plains, had long been a redoubtable opponent of the Ba'thist state. By early 1982 relations between the city and the authorities in Damascus were inflamed, to say the least. The ruin of the local notables, the rise of the 'Alawis and the prolonged terror and counter-terror of the Islamic insurrection had brought this citadel of traditional landed power and Sunni puritanism to the end of its tether.

At 2 a.m. on the night of 2–3 February 1982 an army unit combing the old city fell into an ambush.[24] Roof-top snipers killed perhaps a score of soldiers. The troops had stumbled on the hideout of the local guerrilla commander, 'Umar Jawwad, better known by his *nom de guerre* of Abu Bakr, whose command post deep in the warren was linked by radio to a network of cells. At once government forces were rushed in. Besieged on all sides, Abu Bakr gave the order for a general uprising. Lights were switched on in the city's mosques and the chilling cry of *jihad* against the Ba'th rang out over the loudspeakers used for the call to prayer. At this signal hundreds of Islamic fighters rose from their hiding places. Killing and looting, they burst into the homes of officials and party leaders, overran police posts and ransacked armouries in a bid to seize power in the city. (Two girl parachutists, the special butt of Islamic conservatives, were slain in their beds by assassins who came in over the rooftops.)[25]

A strong guerrilla force set siege to the residence of Governor Muhammad Harba, a local man who had gained a doctorate in France for a study of Syrian agriculture and whom Asad had appointed to his post in January 1980. The terrorists shouted to him through loudhailers to come out with his hands up. But like others on the government side he had stockpiled arms and ammunition, and with his brother and four bodyguards kept the assailants at bay for five hours until security forces fought their way through to him. By the morning of 3 February some seventy leading Ba'thists had been slaughtered and the triumphant guerrillas declared the city 'liberated'. Governor Harba, party secretary Ahmad al-As'ad, intelligence and army chiefs and those members of the local leadership who had survived the night met, bleary-eyed and in arms, at party headquarters to take stock of their desperate situation. They faced defeat by a full-scale urban insurrection such as had never before occurred under Asad's rule.

In Damascus there was a moment of something like panic when Hama rose. The regime itself shook. After battling for five long years it had failed to stamp out an underground which had killed the flower of the 'Alawi professional class and had tarred Asad's presidency with the charge of illegitimacy. Fear, loathing and a river of spilt blood ruled out any thought of a truce. Hama was a last-ditch battle which one side or the other had to win and which, one way or the other, would decide the fate of the country. Every party worker, every paratrooper sent to Hama knew that this time Islamic militancy had to be torn out of the city, whatever the cost. Some such understanding that this was the final act of a long-drawn-out struggle may serve to explain the terrible savagery of the punishment inflicted on the city. Behind the immediate contest lay the old multi-layered hostility between Islam and the Ba'th, between Sunni and 'Alawi, between town and country.

The battle for Hama raged for three grim weeks: the first was spent by the government in regaining control of the town and the last two in hunting down the insurgents. Heliborne troops were sent to help the local garrison seal off the town before going in for the kill. Altogether Hama was besieged by some 12,000 men,[26] but this was no ordinary military operation: it was more of a civil war, testing soldiers' loyalties to the limit. Some deserted to join the insurgents.

As the tide turned slowly in the government's favour, the guerrillas fell back on the old quarters, especially the strongholds of the Barudi and Kaylani districts which they had prepared for a long siege. On the banks of the Orontes river the old mansions of the Kaylani family were smashed by shell-fire or brought down by the mines of army engineers. But the common people living deeper in the maze of streets were the main victims as, without food, water or fuel in the cruel winter weather, they were all too often buried in the ruins of their homes. After heavy shelling, commandos and party irregulars supported by tanks moved in to subdue the acres of mud-and-wattle houses whose interconnecting roof-tops and courtyards were the guerrillas' habitat. Many civilians were slaughtered in the prolonged mopping up, whole districts razed, and numerous acts of savagery reported, many of them after the government had regained control of the town. Entire families were taken from their homes and shot. Some guerrillas escaped into underground canals, whereupon an enraged Asad ordered the exits to be blocked up. Scores of mosques, churches and other ancient monuments were damaged and looted, including the celebrated eighteenth century 'Azm palace museum. In nearly a month of fighting about a third of the historic inner city was demolished.

Government forces too suffered heavy losses to snipers, and many armoured vehicles were hit by grenades in the rubble-strewn streets. But the price of the rebellion was paid by Hama as a whole: large

numbers died in the hunt for the gunmen. Just how many lives were lost in Hama must remain a matter of conjecture, with government sympathizers estimating a mere 3,000 and critics as many as 20,000 and more. Complicating an accurate count was the fact that many women and children fled through the cordon of troops ringing the city and were at first presumed to be among the casualties. But whatever the toll – and a figure of between 5,000 and 10,000 could be close to the truth – the impact of the battle on the Arab and international perception of Asad's regime was very great indeed.

In 1961, twenty years before, a busload of students on a day's outing from Damascus University had stopped at Hama for a cup of coffee, but they were not welcome in that fiercely conservative place. An angry crowd drove them back into their bus because some of the girls were in trousers. Apart from killing a lot of people, the pounding of the town in 1982 was designed to banish such puritanism once and for all. In rebuilding the shattered society a conscious effort was made not just to erase the past but to change attitudes, and a great deal of public money was spent.

Heavily damaged old quarters were bulldozed away, roads were cut through where once no car could pass, squares and gardens were laid out. The whole of Hama was reshaped on a grand scale, with ring roads and roundabouts serving entirely new quarters furnished with schools, clinics, playgrounds and shopping malls. Among major public buildings put up after the rising were a 230-bed hospital, a cultural centre, a girls' sports institute and teacher training college, a central market of oriental design, headquarter buildings for the Peasants' Union and the federations of teachers and engineers, and a sports centre of outrageously ambitious proportions complete with Olympic-sized swimming pool. On Asad's orders, the state funded the construction of two large mosques to make up for those destroyed in the fighting as well as a Catholic church as large as a cathedral. Among the revolutionary changes was the introduction of mixed bathing in 1983 and the first college dormitory block in the whole of Syria to house both male and female students. By then the Sporting Club had some eighty girl members and in 1985 Hama girls were the national ping-pong champions. But all this could not erase the name of Hama as the byword for a massacre.

The disillusioning decade

The war against the terrorists convinced Asad that he was wrestling not just with internal dissent but with a large-scale conspiracy to

unseat him, abetted by Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel and the United States.[27]

> We were not just dealing with killers inside Syria, but with those who masterminded their plans. The plot thickened after Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and many foreign intelligence services became involved. Those who took part in Camp David used the Muslim Brothers against us.

He saw himself as the victim of a 'terrible alliance' of external and internal enemies.[28]

As early as March 1980 he publicly accused the Central Intelligence Agency of encouraging 'sabotage and subversion' in Syria so as to bring 'the entire Arab world under joint US-Israeli domination.'[29] And when on 10 February 1982, in simultaneous statements, the State Department in Washington and the Muslim Brothers in West Germany broke the news of the then still unreported Hama insurrection, already a week old, Asad saw it as clear proof of collusion. By announcing that fierce fighting was taking place the United States, in his view, was attempting to encourage the uprising. The US ambassador, Robert Paganelli, was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at 1.30 a.m. to be told of Syria's displeasure.

Asad's fears were not paranoiac. He was indeed surrounded by enemies. He had exasperated Washington by his attacks on the Egypt-Israel peace treaty. He had broken with Iraq and after the emergence of Ayatollah Khomayni had sided with revolutionary Iran. He was on the worst possible terms with King Husayn of Jordan. He had tangled dangerously with Israel in Lebanon. Another centre of hostility to him was the Syrian expatriate community in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf where over the years thousands of Syrian exiles had settled, many of them members of former landowning or political families. They had no love for Islamic fundamentalism but saw the guerrillas as a battering ram which might bring Asad down. All these had an interest in his overthrow, enough of a motive to arm and fund the guerrillas on the time-honoured Syrian precept that, for an internal opposition to get anywhere, it had to have external support.

The guerrillas were formidable opponents. They had a fortune in foreign money, sophisticated communications equipment and large arms dumps – no fewer than 15,000 machine guns were captured.[30] And as soldiers they were not novices. About half of those captured had been trained in Arab countries, mainly in Jordan. When Asad and Husayn met at Tito's funeral in May 1980, Asad furiously accused the king of having a hand in 'the blood being shed in Syria',[31] a charge

Husayn was publicly to admit five years later when he was once more on good terms with Asad.[32] Evidence of Iraqi complicity was also overwhelming. Many of those arrested confessed under interrogation to links with liaison officers in Baghdad, and many of their weapons and vehicles were of Iraqi origin. Trucks smuggling arms across the desert from Iraq were repeatedly spotted by Syrian military helicopters and intercepted. Asad's fiercest sarcasms were directed at his arch-enemy Saddam Husayn:[33]

> The hangman of Iraq was not content to kill tens of thousands of his own people. He came to Syria to carry out his favourite hobbies of killing, assassination and sabotage. That man has been sending arms for the criminals in Syria ever since he took power.

The Syrian government also seized weapons supplied to the guerrillas by Lebanese Christian militias, especially the ultra-nationalist Guardians of the Cedars who were closely linked to Israel. Asad was convinced that Israel used these groups to destabilize him and on at least one occasion Syrian agents snatched guerrillas from Lebanon where they had taken refuge with the Phalanges.[34] In any event, the mountain frontier with Lebanon and the desert frontier with Iraq made it virtually impossible to staunch the flow of arms.

In Asad's mind one of the most telling pieces of evidence implicating the United States was the discovery of US equipment in the hands of the guerrillas, and especially sophisticated communications equipment of a kind, he claimed, that could only be sold to a third party with US government permission. Syrian intelligence was convinced that an American manufacturer had, with the US government's blessing, arranged for consignments to reach the guerrillas through Israel, East Beirut and Amman. Asad later recounted:[35]

> We told the Americans that we had proof and they asked us to produce it, which we did. They denied giving the Muslim Brothers this equipment. 'All right, then', we said, 'here are the serial numbers. Perhaps you can tell us to whom you did sell it.' The Americans refused to say. Finally I said to them, 'Your involvement is clear and nothing can prove your innocence, but I'm prepared to let the matter rest'.

But despite their funding, weapons, sophisticated matériel, and their proven ability to disrupt the state, the guerrillas were political simpletons. They spoke of establishing an Islamic republic in Syria, but

advanced no coherent programme. No one truly knew what life would be like under their rule, and although they had the sympathy of religious conservatives, and of some merchants, former landowners and other victims of Ba'th rule, the weight of opinion was against them. Their long campaign of terror was political insanity. At the end of the day Ba'thist Syria, a state ruled by an armed party and resting on a broad coalition of the countryside and the swelling public sector, proved robust enough to defeat the challenge.

After Hama immense relief was felt in Syria – at least on the winning side. It was possible for normal life to resume, for officials to walk about without fear of the gunman, and for their wives and families to emerge from their hiding places. Asad himself, who had been virtually invisible for months, made a dramatic appearance on the streets of Damascus on 7 March 1982, the eve of the nineteenth anniversary of the Ba'th's revolution, when for two full hours he was carried shoulder-high by a tumultuous crowd from the Guest Palace to parliament. That day it was a new Asad, brutal and vengeful, who roared:[36]

> Brothers and sons, death to the criminal Muslim Brothers! Death to the hired Muslim Brothers who tried to play havoc with the homeland! Death to the Muslim Brothers who were hired by US intelligence, reaction and Zionism!

The passage from the 1970s to the 1980s brought significant changes in the style and thinking of Syria's ruler. Optimism faded. A certain trust in the future gave way to a harsher, more cynical judgement of men and affairs as the world showed itself a complex and cruel place. Asad's nature became tougher, harder, more suspicious about scheming enemies at home and abroad.

The Muslim Brothers' terror campaign set the seal on an enormously disillusioning decade. It must be recalled that it followed immediately on the long unsuccessful struggle with Israel and the United States over the nature of the post-October War settlement. In Asad's mind the physical battle with the guerrillas was an extension of the diplomatic one which had ended with the disastrous US-sponsored Camp David accords, only the latest as he saw it in a long string of Western conspiracies, dating back over fifty years to the First World War, to divide and enfeeble the Arabs. The insurrection was just another instalment in the plot: he was being punished for his refusal to surrender. He grew to believe that he was rejected by the West, that the West did not approve of him, that Washington and Jerusalem, let alone

his Arab rivals, were bent on his destruction, and moreover, that far from encouraging Israel to be reasonable the West threw its weight behind Israel's expansionism and its dreams of hegemony. At home the lesson he drew from the terrorist war was that the Right had not disarmed but during all the years since the Ba'th revolution had merely lain low waiting for the moment to pounce. A vengeful Asad turned left, imposing tighter controls over private business and reducing still further the acreage of individual land-holdings. For a while in the wake of the emergency there was a return to something like the class warfare of the 1960s.

The disillusioning decade took a heavy toll. The regime which Asad had intended to be humane was brutalized. Habits of arbitrary rule acquired in the struggle for survival proved addictive, and the relatively liberal atmosphere of the beginning of his presidency could not easily flourish again in the shadow of the powerful instruments of repression which had grown up.

Asad did not revel in killing, but resorted to it only for *raisons d'état* or in what might laxly be called self-defence. Faced with the gravity of the threat from the terrorists, he sacrificed many of the principles of his Corrective Movement. Unleashing Special Forces on whole communities, using tank fire against residential quarters, slaughtering prisoners, arming civilian supporters, shooting suspects or, what was scarcely better, hauling them in batches before field courts – this slide into brutality swept aside any semblance of the due process of law. Intelligence agencies, much used in the Middle East as instruments of state power by Arab regimes, by Israel, and by interested foreign states, loomed larger than ever. They had been virtually unknown in Syria before the 1950s, but were introduced in their all-pervasive form by Nasser's union regime. The big expansion occurred, however, with the struggle against the Muslim Brothers. It was then that intelligence agencies infiltrated many Syrian institutions, including the diplomatic service which was to be a source of later headaches. As for the Ba'th party, its mood turned triumphalist after the crushing of the underground. Ba'thists saw the ordeal as conferring on them an unchallenged right to rule and a free hand with the spoils.

Asad was by nature solitary and authoritarian. These aspects of his temperament now grew more pronounced. In 1970 he was popular, by 1982 he was feared.

20

Standing Alone

In the 1980s Asad became more remote and more an object of orchestrated adulation than he had been in the 1970s, but how much of this was a reaction to the events he had lived through and how much a development of his own personality was open to question. He had never seemed to enjoy contact with the crowd, but security worries made him something of a recluse, rarely travelling round the country and even in Damascus seldom seen outside the highly guarded short length of street linking his house to the presidential office. He became known to his subjects only on television.

Years of absolutism resulted in Asad's image becoming somewhat larger than life, while that of his colleagues shrank, a state of affairs with which he did not seem unduly unhappy. By the 1980s the honest nationalist who had won world attention as one of the toughest of Arab leaders was carried aloft on the wings of a personality cult which endowed him with the stature of a superman. This unhealthy ascent was another product of the Muslim Brotherhood crisis. In the boom years of the 1970s when employment was buoyant and money plentiful, such inflation of the leader was unnecessary: the country's prosperity spoke for itself. But when recession started to bite and the Islamic guerrillas shattered the peace, a public relations campaign was mounted in which he was praised more fulsomely than anyone before in modern Syria.

The inventor of the cult was Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad, Asad's Minister of Information from 1 September 1974 until his untimely death of brain cancer on 29 December 1983, one of the longest serving ministers in Asad's presidency and one of the closest to his master. A talented and lively 'Alawi journalist from Homs, Ahmad had caught Asad's eye during the October War when he brought out a twice daily newssheet in which he wrote morale-boosting editorials. Promoted minister, he streamlined Syria's media by welding into a team the seven

men concerned with information (the heads of radio-television; the three dailies, *Al-Ba'th*, *Al-Thawra* and *Tishrin*; the state news agency SANA; advertising; and press distribution) – all to the greater glory of Asad. The key to his success was his ability to catch the trend of Asad's thinking and prepare opinion for changes of policy. In the rage and fury of Arab politics, ministers of information are very important, and much as Mohamed Hasanein Heikal had been to Nasser – publicist, sounding-box and image-maker – so Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad was to Asad. Evidence of the personality cult was the constant recital of his name by all and sundry, the immense portraits of him hung from prominent buildings and the numerous statues erected to him up and down the country, such as the massive bronze figure in pensive pose seated at the entrance to the new Asad Library opened in Damascus in 1985.

But the man who was thus adulated had aged in the crisis years. Eating irregularly, rarely going out for fresh air, closeted in his heavily-curtained office for fourteen hours at a time, he undermined his health and grew haggard. He slept little and developed the disconcerting habit of summoning an aide or a friendly ambassador to his residence in the middle of the night for a chat which was likely to last until 3 a.m. when, with the household long since in bed, Asad would call in one of the guards to make his guest a cup of coffee. In 1977 he had built a large villa on the Mediterranean coast north of Latakia which became known rather grandly as his summer palace. Here during the difficult years he would go from time to time by himself to think things out and ponder his response to events. He liked to focus in solitude on a single problem, wrestle with every aspect of it, sleep on it, and wake up to fresh ideas.

Fear of the gunman was perhaps not the only, or even the main, reason for his seclusion. Perhaps, in accordance with Machiavelli's dictum that to lead men you must turn your back on them, he made remoteness a principle of government.

Access to the president, the rarest of commodities which Asad measured out with minute care, became the touchstone of influence. He maintained tension between his subordinates by making himself more or less approachable to them, by seeming at times to listen to one more than his fellows, to give his favour first to one then to another. Cabinet ministers might see him only twice in their term of duty, on being sworn in and on leaving office. A very big gap separated Asad at the pinnacle of the system from the next man down, whom he changed from time to time, and then a further but smaller gap separated the current favourite from the rest of the ruling group.

From his early days of authority, even when he was still minister of

defence in the late 1960s, Asad's relations with his colleagues had tended to be formal. Even his oldest army comrade, Mustafa Tlas, then Chief of Staff, knocked politely before entering his office. But with presidential power came ever greater formality. In the 1980s there was no socializing between him and his colleagues, no invitations to each other's houses, not even courtesy visits on feast days. Asad's wife might on occasion receive the wives of leading personages, but as she herself led a life of great discretion (appearing in public only briefly once a year at the Martyrs' Orphanage), this was as near as anyone got to friendly relations with the presidential couple.

For his staff Asad's inaccessibility was reinforced by the fact that he did not keep regular hours. He had an office at home and another in the presidency, and no one knew which he would use on any given morning nor when he would come to work. His day was lengthy but extraordinarily free from routine or fixed appointments. Over breakfast he read the briefings prepared by his security chiefs and his staff of news-gatherers. He structured the rest of the day in his own unhurried way. It could mean that foreign ambassadors had to wait for months to present their credentials, important visitors were sometimes kept cooling their heels for days on end, and state papers piled up awaiting his signature. His week was as unstructured as his day: Asad did not take a weekend break and no one could remember when he had last gone on holiday. Fridays, the Muslim day of rest, saw some slackening of work but his staff would be at their posts as on any other day and he would expect to be able to reach key subordinates on the telephone.

Asad's preferred instrument of government was the telephone. In the early 1970s he had ruled by chairing meetings, by reconciling opposing views, by being physically at the centre of things. By the 1980s he had become for most people a disembodied voice on the telephone. He scarcely ever attended meetings, but his officials were always aware that he was watching and would pick up the telephone if their performance fell short. He seemed to spend the best part of the day on the telephone but the calls always originated with him: only a handful of people, perhaps no more than three or four security chiefs, had the right to ring him. Others – including the highest in the land – had to content themselves with passing messages and receiving instructions through Abu Salim, the presidential private secretary. The prime minister, the top generals, the party bosses, the heads of state enterprises lived on the *qui vive* in anticipation of a call from the boss. He might demand an explanation or need a figure and require it immediately. Many found such interrogation by telephone difficult to

handle. He left them in no doubt when he was displeased. His crisp manner in these exchanges contrasted with the leisurely discursiveness of his conversations with foreign visitors. He was known never to forget or forgive disloyalty or disobedience.

Asad's intimidating manner meant that his colleagues were reluctant to offer him unsolicited advice, preferring to puzzle out what was on his mind. Yet in dominating others Asad did not resort to fits of temper or banging the table but, always civil, relied rather on his greater experience and also on the fact, that having made them, he could also break them. His associates respected him as a great man, while never forgetting that it was he who had promoted them out of the ranks and that their future and that of their families depended entirely on his favour.

All too often, and with good reason, people were frightened of making mistakes and would not dare take the initiative, with the result that Asad's desk was weighed down with trivial matters. 'This is not the business of a president', he would sometimes grumble, yet in such a personal system a ruling by him might be needed to arbitrate quite small issues. For example, two medical students wrote a book, secured a foreword by a prominent physician, and submitted it for publication – but without first clearing it with the university medical faculty as regulations demanded. The faculty head wanted to expel them, the minister of higher education wanted to defer their final examinations by a year, and it required the president's intervention to sort things out.[1]

Asad professed to dislike giving orders. He urged his ministers, deputy ministers, army chiefs, directors-general of public enterprises and the prime minister himself to act on their own initiative. Dr Kasm, who served Asad as prime minister for nearly eight years, skilfully trod the fine line between deference and independence, owing his long tenure of office to his understanding of the boss's complex personality.[2]

> One could argue with him and he would listen, but you had to be sure you had a good case. It wasn't always easy. He didn't give orders, in fact he refused to do so. Even if I were to say to him, 'What would you think if I did such-and-such?' he would answer, 'You are the prime minister, not me. Do it, and then we shall see. If it turns out well, I shall say bravo, and if not . . .'

Nor did Asad seem to need advice. By the standards of most modern states, his presidential offices were grossly understaffed. His principal aides were a private secretary and a general who handled his dealings with the army. One of the most important departments of the presidency was the news and information office, which monitored Arab and foreign press and broadcasts and compiled thrice daily digests for him. It also handled anything concerning him in the media. From the early 1980s this key news department was headed by a Syrian Protestant, the hard-headed, no-nonsense Jubran Kurriyeh who had taken over from the Palestinian As'ad Kamil Elyas, for years Asad's chief interpreter, note-taker and speech-writer. But however able and hard-working these men were, the presidency seemed to be run on antique lines, with no proper archives, no proper research or secretarial back-up, no word-processors visible, no apparatus commensurate with the role and image Syria had achieved in the world. There were no facilities for typing letters in English, and it might take two or three days to find a document. A nasty incident occurred in 1984 when a greetings cable from President Reagan on the occasion of Ramadan was mislaid and reached Asad only some ten days after it was sent!

Asad saw himself as the guardian of Syria's institutions and the arbiter between competing interests. 'I am the head of the country, not of the government', he would say.[3] He claimed that Syria was ruled by a collective leadership and that his generals, party colleagues and ministers deferred to him only as they might to an elder brother. But his authority was so vast and his control of detail so tight that he was without question the ultimate decision-maker on matters big and small.

The final defeat of the Muslim Brothers brought a certain change in the lifestyle of the Asad family. After the emergency the villa where he lived with his wife and five children was extensively remodelled, expanded and refurbished, although when the decorator put in gilt Louis XIV-style furniture Asad had it removed. The new setting was spacious and comfortable enough to receive heads of state and other important visitors, but it was still no more than the home of a successful professional man with none of the Arabian Nights splendour of the palaces of kings and presidents in other states of the region. Even so, it was a far cry from the simplicities of the Asad household in the early 1970s. A contractor recalled building a bomb shelter in Asad's house in 1973 with its entrance leading off the laundry room. When the workmen arrived at six a.m. they used to drink a cup of coffee with the president who was already up. His wife would bring down the laundry to the washing machine and prepare her husband's meals in the kitchen. By the 1980s a cook and a maid were in evidence, but Asad kept the bed he had slept on as defence minister fifteen years earlier and the chair he used when he first took power. He was more interested in power than its trappings.

The sobriety of the Asad household was relaxed in the 1980s as their children grew up and started having friends of their own. The eldest child and only daughter, Bushra, was her father's favourite. She was a tall elegant young woman with a lively face framed in cascading light brown hair. She qualified as a pharmacist at Damascus University where her four brothers followed her in due course. Basil, Asad's eldest son, studied civil engineering. He was a serious, determined youngster, interested in computers and a sportsman good at horseriding, sailing, shooting and parachuting. As for the three younger boys, Bashar studied medicine, Mahir business studies and Majd, the youngest, electrical engineering. Asad insisted that they complete their education in Syria, unlike the children of some grandees who preferred foreign universities. At college the Asad children, aware of their duty to set a good example, worked hard, wore the prescribed military-style uniform and were noted for their good manners, unlike some of the *jeunesse dorée* of the regime who wore fashionable clothes, quarrelled with their teachers, and whose wild driving was a hazard on the streets of the capital. The daughter of one security chief turned up for her examination with a posse of bodyguards and insisted that the professor help her write her papers.

The ethos of the Asad family was rather self-consciously puritanical. The children were intensely loyal to their father yet as they grew up they saw very little of him. Basil recalled:[4]

> We saw our father at home but he was so busy that three days might pass without our talking to him. We never had breakfast together, or dinner and I can't remember our ever lunching together as a family, or only once or twice, on formal occasions. As a family we might spend a day or two together in Latakia in the summer, but even there he worked in his office and we didn't see much of him.

The security doctrine

The harsher and more redoubtable Asad of the 1980s was, it could be said, the creation of Henry Kissinger and the Israelis. It was Kissinger's manipulation of the Middle East in Israel's interest which destroyed Asad's hopes of the possibility of an honourable settlement and brought out the Saladin in him.

Asad had come to power with the notion that if only the Arabs could rise from their knees after the 1967 defeat and show their valour, the justice of their case would be manifest and the world and Israel itself would see the wisdom of a fair deal. Such hopeful thinking produced the October War, conceived as an effort to recover lost territory and open the way for negotiations. Although the war was a military disappointment, in its wake Asad was ready for peace with Israel and a new relationship with the United States which he thought genuinely wanted a comprehensive settlement. This was the age of innocence.

Then began the slow erosion of hope, the steady dispelling of illusion. The first shock was Kissinger's removal of Egypt from the battlefield with the second Sinai disengagement agreement of 1975. Even so, and particularly with Jimmy Carter's arrival on the scene, Asad still entertained the hope that peace could be made at an international conference of all the parties under superpower sponsorship.

By 1978 the mood had changed. Israel's subversion of Carter's Middle East policy, culminating in the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, marked Asad's loss of trust in American good intentions. Israel's belligerent behaviour thereafter convinced him that it was not ready for co-existence with its neighbours. His perception of Israel darkened. Menachem Begin's election, the settlement of the West Bank, the destruction of Iraq's nuclear reactor, the annexation of the Syrian Golan, the US-Israeli agreement on strategic co-operation, and the invasion of Lebanon were evidence in his eyes that Israel was irredeemably aggressive and expansionist, seeking nothing less than regional mastery and Arab capitulation. With such a neighbour peace could no longer be realistically envisaged. Asad was careful never to close the door to a settlement, but Israel's maximalism brought out a maximalism of his own. The latent Arab view of Israel as a foreign body in Arab Asia, the product of an outdated Western colonialism which could not live in an Arab environment, was revived.

He could not forgive the United States its role in the worsening climate. He particularly resented Washington's encouraging Israel to make separate arrangements with individual Arab countries, rightly judging that this policy gave Israel the advantage, undermined Arab security, and ignored the profound sentiment of common destiny uniting the Arab peoples.

After these disappointments he threw himself defiantly into the anti-American camp. When, for example, in November 1979 revolutionary students took over the American embassy in Tehran and held its staff hostage, Asad came out in support of Iran. And a month later when Soviet troops marched into Afghanistan, he was one of the very few leaders outside the Soviet bloc not to condemn the invasion. Syria abstained at the UN in January 1980 when a vote was taken on the

Afghan crisis. Asad was signalling to whoever cared to notice that, faced with Washington's bias, he had no option but to turn to the Soviet Union. Then on 8 October 1980 he signed a twenty-year Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation with Brezhnev in Moscow. He had long resisted such a tie but now, significantly, the initiative for it came from him. As long as he still had faith in the equity of American diplomacy, he had balked at such an alliance, but, with Carter's collapse to Israeli pressure, he saw the Soviets as providing his only credible deterrent against Begin's dangerously overweening Israel. Another pointer to his anti-Western mood was his friendship for the combative Colonel Qadhafi. He travelled to Libya for the tenth anniversary celebrations of Qadhafi's revolution on 1 September 1979 and within a few months revived the militant 'Steadfastness Front' of Syria, Libya, Algeria, South Yemen and the PLO originally formed in response to Sadat's 1977 visit to Jerusalem. From Tripoli, in another snub to Washington, Asad went on to Cuba for a non-aligned conference.

After the loss of Egypt in 1978, Asad had hoped to redress the regional balance by an alliance with Iraq, the one Arab country which had given Syria effective military help in the October War. Although the two ruling parties were at odds, popular pressure for closer ties made a Syrian-Iraqi axis seem a credible option – at least for a few months. The collapse of these expectations in 1979 and Iraq's total immersion in its struggle with Iran resulted in a fundamental redrawing of Asad's map of the Middle East. He had lost Sadat, broken with Saddam Husayn, and found himself confronting a dangerous Begin buoyed up by an uncritical Ronald Reagan. The challenge forced him to rethink his regional strategy and produced the policies and ideas which then became associated with his name.

Asad had always been a patient man, able to take the long view in conflicts with Arab rivals and in the contest with Israel. Believing that time was on the Arabs' side, he counselled other leaders not to hurry, not to negotiate impulsively, not to make concessions from weakness. He felt the Arabs were too inclined to worry about how to solve Israel's problems rather than their own. He urged them to stand up and be steadfast.

These ideas became the basis of a security doctrine: Syria had to keep up the fight – with Soviet help, with whatever Arab help it could muster, but above all with self-help. As the only remaining barrier to Israeli domination, it must if necessary stand alone. Two corollaries sprang from this doctrine: the first was the imperative need to protect the core Levant area with Syria at its centre, the second the ambition to achieve parity with Israel, what Asad liked to call 'comprehensive strategic balance'. The former was essentially defensive, the latter more of a springboard for future action, whether in war or peace.

It was Asad's sense of increased vulnerability which compelled him to seek to extend his influence over his immediate environment so as to prevent Israel turning his flank. The defence of Damascus demanded that neither Lebanon nor Jordan, nor indeed the Palestinians, be allowed to enter into bilateral negotiations or to conclude separate deals with Israel, as Sadat had done. Any such contacts would provide Israel with a point of entry into the Arab Levant, enabling it to fragment and control it, neutralizing Syrian power in the process. Asad's own security and what he took to be Arab security in general caused him to insist that Beirut, Amman and the PLO pursue policies in harmony with his own.

For example, when King Husayn convened an Arab summit in Amman in November 1980 to win support for his vision of negotiations with Israel leading to a Jordan-West Bank federation, Asad boycotted the meeting, then moved troops to the Jordan frontier. He did not question that Syria had the right to intervene militarily against Jordan to prevent it threatening Syrian, or more generally Arab national, interests.[5]

In Asad's vision of how to cope with Israel the notion of parity was even more central than the defence of the Levant. This was his most radical break with the somewhat defeatist Arab consensus which had hitherto prevailed, and Asad came to it from his gloomy observation of the course of Sadat's peace diplomacy. In his view, Sadat had not made peace with Israel, he had capitulated: Sinai had not been liberated, Egypt itself had been fettered. Peace, he concluded, was not for the weak, and it was a maxim to which he returned time and time again.[6] Parity was not just a matter of striking a military balance with Israel but of matching it right across the board, in education, technology, social progress and external alliances, as well as in purely armed strength. The conclusion in late 1981 of the US-Israeli agreement on strategic co-operation gave a further impetus to his way of thinking.[7]

Asad had an acute awareness of the many slights the Arabs had suffered at Israel's hands since 1948 as a result of their weakness. Unless they could pull themselves up to Israel's level, they could neither wage war nor negotiate peace: however it was dressed up, the flagrant imbalance could lead only to capitulation. The *status quo* of 'no peace, no war' was preferable to either an unwinnable war or an imposed peace. He refused to attend the first Fez summit of November 1981 at which Crown Prince Fahd (later king) of Saudi Arabia tabled a peace plan which Asad considered premature.

The heart of his argument was that a genuine settlement went

beyond the return of territory to a revision of the entire power relationship between Israel and the Arabs. Whose will was to prevail in the region? The Arabs might get land back only to live in fear of what Israel might do next. What was the good of Egypt regaining Sinai if the price was toothlessness and loss of regional importance, or of Jordan recovering the West Bank if it were to become an Israeli vassal, or even of Syria winning back the Golan if it meant abandoning its Arab vocation and its championship of Palestinian rights?

In Asad's scheme of things, the Palestine problem was too important to be left to the Palestinians. It was much bigger than a disputed land or the fate of a few hundred thousand refugees. It was the rightful concern of all the Arabs, and the way it was settled would determine under whose order the Arabs would live and what meaning was to be given to their independence. A 'wrong' settlement – for example, the proposal for Palestinian 'autonomy' under an Israeli umbrella or any sort of Israel-Jordan deal over the West Bank – would perpetuate Israel's hegemony and put the Arabs at a permanent strategic disadvantage. Even more than the need for defence, this lofty view of Arab national imperatives was the crux of Asad's long quarrels with Sadat, Husayn and 'Arafat, all tempted at different times by partial solutions.

Asad ruled out a regional settlement imposed by Israeli military force as he believed the Egypt-Israel treaty to have been, and indeed any peace made in return for a recognition of Israeli superior power. In conversations with American envoys he sought to convince them that the key to Middle East peace lay not in Israeli supremacy but in an Arab-Israeli balance of power on the model of the East-West balance. Viewing the problem exactly as the Israelis did, he aspired to be a guarantor of the peace, to be strong enough to make the enemy keep it. He dismissed as unstable and humiliating any peace resting on Israeli power alone.

Containing Israel, checking what he saw as its inherent expansionism, forcing it to abandon aggression by a system of mutual deterrence – these were the constants of Asad's thinking in the years after Camp David. But in demanding parity, he challenged Israel's cherished dogma of the need to be stronger than any possible Arab combination. And, as Israel showed no inclination to give up its military edge or the United States to falter in its commitment to it, Asad's programme seemed a touch unrealistic. His determination to stand up for himself sometimes attracted the charge that he was an obstacle to peace. Moreover, the closer Syria seemed to get to parity, the more it was perceived in Israel as an unacceptable threat which would have to be dealt with. Israel fought Asad in Lebanon in 1982, and further war scares waxed and waned throughout the 1980s, but Asad's resolve did not weaken and over the years he had the satisfaction of seeing much of the Arab world come round to his way of thinking.

'Greater Syria'

Asad's focus on the Levant led inevitably to the accusation that he was trying to put together a 'Greater Syria', a concept of considerable local resonance which aroused apprehensions among his Arab rivals, not to mention Israel and the West. When he began to press Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinians into his orbit, the question was asked whether, under Ba'thist camouflage, he was not in fact harbouring pan-Syrian ambitions. He had at various times in his career made statements of a pan-Syrian flavour. For example, when Golda Meir claimed the Golan as Israeli, Asad retorted on 8 March 1974 that Palestine itself was 'a principal part of southern Syria'. In April 1975, at the Ba'th's Sixth Regional Congress, he argued that there was no contradiction between the unity of natural Syria and the aspiration to Arab unity. When he sent his army into Lebanon as if by right in 1976, pan-Syrians applauded this overt challenge to the colonial carve-up of the 'Syrian homeland'. It was at about this time that the Syrian Ba'th made contact with the Syrian Social Nationalist Party after a twenty-year breach between them following the assassination of 'Adnan al-Malki in 1955, the first step in a partial public reconciliation. The suggestion was that the objectives of these old rivals were no longer so far apart. Asad's 'national strategy' of resisting Israel in Lebanon seemed to overlap with the SSNP's 'national ideology' of a reconstituted natural Syria.[8] (It was perhaps no accident that in the 1980s Syria's defence minister, General Mustafa Tlas, who also ran a publishing house, reprinted *Nushu' al-umam* (The Rise of Nations), the seminal work first published in 1938 by the SSNP founder Antun Sa'ada (1904–49), in which the case for a unique Syrian identity was argued.)

But these pointers did not amount to a convincing case. There was, in fact, a good deal of contrary evidence to show that Asad was no convert to pan-Syrian romanticism. For example, he disagreed with the pan-Syrians over Egypt. Whereas he had strained every nerve to preserve the bond with Egypt until it was snapped by Camp David, they opposed Syrian-Egyptian links in the belief that Syrian nationalism – the unity of the land and its people – was something quite distinct from the wider Arab world.

A committed Arab nationalist since his boyhood, Asad forged his Levant security doctrine as a means to contain Israel. At odds with both Cairo and Baghdad, he could find no comfort in pan-Arab unionism and fell back *faute de mieux* on his Syrian environment. While his rhetoric about his neighbours was sometimes proprietorial – as when he ridiculed King Husayn as the 'marshal of East Jordan' who presumed to rule a territory carved out of Syria by the British[9] – his design was not annexationist. He was even careful to deny such an ambition regarding Lebanon, where it might seem most natural and where his security was most at risk. 'The Ba'thist regime', he declared on 29 December 1985, 'was the first to recognize Lebanon's sovereignty, independence and unity It is true that we are one people, but we are two states.'[10] In sum, his 'Greater Syria' was a product of strategic need, not ideological conviction.

Yet, such disclaimers apart, Asad evidently had a deep-rooted sense of the greatness of Syria, its centrality, its leading role in Arab politics – and indeed of the dignity of its leader. Under his rule it had ceased to be the plaything of more powerful neighbours to become a star player in its own right – in his view Israel's only effective challenger. To Syria's reputation as the fountainhead of Arab nationalism and the motor of the Arab revolution of modern times he added strength, stability and a coherent if often contested strategy.

In the mid-1980s the massive honey-coloured walls of the Damascus citadel, last reconditioned in the mid-thirteenth century by Baybars, the first Mamluk sultan, were cleared of the mud-and-wattle clutter obscuring them and repair work was begun by teams of stonemasons. The restoration of this political monument at the heart of the old city was no travel-brochure promotion dreamed up by the Ministry of Tourism but a political act by the president expressing the will to resist of the ancient capital of *bilad al-sham*.

21

Ally of the Ayatollah

The most daring feature of Asad's foreign policy, reshaped to confront the world of Camp David, was undoubtedly his alliance with revolutionary Iran, which led to something quite new in the region – a Shi'i axis from Tehran through Damascus to South Lebanon. From the moment Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomayni took power in early 1979 Asad judged it a supreme Arab interest to befriend him. It was not a perception shared by many in the region, least of all by Iran's Arab neighbours. Nasser had preached that Arabs should unite only with Arabs and here was Asad, a latter-day champion of the Arab cause, aligning himself with a major non-Arab power then threatening Arab states across the Gulf.

To Arab opinion, even to Asad's own domestic opinion, his decision to back Iran was perplexing and controversial. The choice set him at odds with much of the Arab world, introducing an element of unease and apprehension into other leaders' estimates of him, for the alliance with Iran served to underline what they saw as the atypical, somewhat menacing character of the Syrian regime. Once again, as when he intervened against the Palestinians in Lebanon in 1976, Asad seemed to be stepping outside the Arab nationalist mainstream. Yet, unmoved by the worries of others and convinced as ever of his own rectitude, he stuck to his guns through the ups and downs of the Gulf War. By joining hands with a state outside the Arab family and with a revolutionary Islamic movement challenging the Sunni establishments, Asad displayed uncommon freedom from convention and rewrote the rules of the Middle East power system. There were important strategic reasons for his move, but it was also rooted in his own background as a member of a community derived from Shi'ism and in the fellow feeling of a man of rural and minority origins for people, and especially the deprived Shi'a of Lebanon, who had themselves long been oppressed.

The Iranian mullahs whom Asad befriended triumphed over the

Peacock Throne after a prolonged trial of strength. Throughout 1978 Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi had fought a running battle against mutinous mobs until, his will sapped by cancer and American indecision, he threw in his hand, leaving the country on 16 January 1979. Two weeks later on 1 February, the 76-year-old Khomayni returned home to claim his inheritance.

Asad, then in the throes of his life-and-death struggle with the Muslim Brothers, watched Khomayni's Islamic assault on the Shah with close attention. The Shi'ism of the Ayatollah was a very different sort of militant Islam from the Sunni fundamentalism of the Syrian guerrillas. In fact, Asad's rage at the guerrillas and at the Sunni establishments in the Arab world which lent them overt or covert support may have been a factor in his decision to reach out towards Tehran. Far from being disturbed by the Iranian revolution, he cheered it on.

Even while the Shah was still in power he gave a helping hand to some of Khomayni's lieutenants – men like Ibrahim Yazdi, Mustafa Chamran and Sadeq Qotbzadeh who were later to serve as ministers of the Islamic Republic. Qotbzadeh, for example, was given a Syrian passport which allowed him to conduct his anti-Shah activities in the disguise of Paris correspondent of the Damascus daily, *al-Thawra*.

Asad's main contact with the Shah's opponents in the 1970s was the Imam Musa al-Sadr, head of the Lebanese Shi'i Supreme Council, the remarkable religious leader of Iranian origin who had established himself in Lebanon in 1959 and who in nineteen years of pastoral and political work gave the downtrodden Shi'a of Lebanon unprecedented cohesion and self-esteem.[1] On frequent visits to Damascus Sadr became Asad's confidant, political ally and friend: he was the man who in 1973 helped Asad confront his Sunni critics in Damascus by proclaiming in a celebrated *fatwa* that the 'Alawis were an authentic part of Shi'i Islam. In the difficult summer of 1976, a crucially delicate moment of Asad's career, he did him an important service by keeping the Lebanese Shi'a community out of Kamal Junblatt's leftist coalition which Syria was at the time trying to rein in. As Asad's go-between with the Khomayni camp in the 1970s, Sadr was the harbinger of the Damascus-Tehran axis of the 1980s although Sadr himself did not live to see it. In August 1978 he vanished mysteriously on a visit to Libya; in fact, the news of his disappearance and presumed death broke during the Camp David talks that September and Asad mourned him as bitterly as he mourned Sadat's defection.

Asad welcomed the Ayatollah's takeover in Tehran with a telegram of warm congratulations and, a few weeks later, sent him a gift of an

illuminated Quran carried to Qum by Syria's Information Minister, Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad. After kissing the holy book, the Ayatollah thanked Syria for the offer of asylum it had made him in October 1978[2] when, having been expelled from Iraq and not yet settled at Neuphle-le-Château, near Paris, he needed a base from which to mount his final attack on the Shah. Syrian-Iranian relations developed rapidly after the revolution. Asad's Foreign Minister, Khaddam, visited Tehran in August 1979, and rather extravagantly proclaimed the Iranian revolution to be 'the most important event in our contemporary history'. Syria, he boasted, had supported it 'prior to its outbreak, during it and after its triumph'.[3]

One reason Asad chose to back revolutionary Iran was that he disliked the Shah's anti-Arab partnership with Israel and his subservience to the United States. The two men had met in December 1975 when Asad went to Tehran in the hope of persuading the Shah to press Washington to be more even-handed in the Arab-Israeli dispute.[4] But nothing came of it and to Asad's anger the Shah lent a hand in Begin's scheming to entrap Sadat. So Asad shed no tears over his downfall and determined to put the change of regime in Tehran to his advantage.

He was at pains to convince his fellow Arabs that the Ayatollah's Iran should be seen in a totally new light – no longer the Shah's Iran, the friend of Israel, the agent of America, but an Iran committed to anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism. He argued that the Ayatollah had broken the vice in which Israel and the Shah had held the Arabs for three decades. Much like the Israelis, Asad saw the Middle East as a single whole, his geostrategic view extending beyond the Arab heart to include peripheral countries. From this standpoint he welcomed the change which Iran made in the regional balance of power, sensing that, at a time when Israel was more dangerous than ever, he could find strength in this new dynamic force. Iran, he argued, was a natural counterweight to Egypt; Israel had gained Egypt by the peace treaty, but lost Iran to the revolution.

From his own vantage point Asad was right to see an asset in the new-style Iran. The fall of the Shah was a blow to Israeli and Western interests as great as that dealt twenty-five years earlier by Nasser's emergence on the Middle East scene. Like Nasser's Arab nationalism, Khomayni's Islamic internationalism was an indigenous movement determined to affirm itself against outsiders. Denouncing the United States as the 'Great Satan' Khomayni tore up the Shah's agreements with it, broke off diplomatic relations with Israel, stopped the flow of oil to it, withdrew from the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), and, in a symbolic gesture, turned over the Israeli embassy in Tehran to

'Arafat's PLO. So while many shuddered at the rise of the Ayatollah, Asad sided with him in a striking demonstration of political foresight and strategic flexibility.

Relations with Saddam Husayn

But in claiming the Ayatollah as a friend, Asad was also seeking help against his most dangerous Arab neighbour, Iraq. Khomayni's Iran was well placed to provide it.

Syria and Iraq were divided by party schism, by geopolitical rivalry and by the personal animosity of their leaders. They also quarrelled over economic matters, over the division of the Euphrates waters and over oil pipelines, one of which, to Iraq's regret, crossed Syrian territory and was controlled by Asad and another which to Syria's anger, Iraq had built across Turkey.[5] For years the two countries had played host to each other's exiles, shadowy figures who opposed reconciliation between Damascus and Baghdad because they feared that they would be sacrificed to it. Incestuously involved with each other, the Iraqi and Syrian Ba'th parties were riven by mutual distrust as each was convinced that the other had planted a Trojan horse in its ranks. Yet in spite of this background of hostility, Syria and Iraq buried the hatchet in 1978 following Sadat's entente with Israel in a common effort to contain and punish him. Better relations between Damascus and Baghdad seemed on the way.

On 28 July 1979, however, Iraq's strong man, Saddam Husayn al-Takriti, announced the uncovering of a plot against him hatched by some of his closest colleagues – in league, as he alleged, with a 'foreign side' soon identified as Syria.[6] More than fifty of the accused were brought before a special court and a score of them including some of the most prominent men in Iraq were gunned down by their party comrades, Saddam Husayn himself to the fore.

Twelve days before announcing the plot Saddam had taken over as president of Iraq from Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, at which time he also assumed the functions of secretary-general of the Ba'th party, commander-in-chief, head of the government and chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council. All power was his. It appeared that the elimination of his rivals was linked to his accusations against Syria. In any event, talk of reconciliation between Baghdad and Damascus now abruptly ended.

Asad protested innocence and asked Saddam for evidence of Syrian complicity. He sent Foreign Minister Khaddam and Chief of Staff

Shihabi to Baghdad to assure him that if Iraq had any proof of Syrian wrongdoing those responsible would be punished. All they brought back was a tape-recording of rambling confessions by one of the accused. Asad then proposed that Iraq's allegations be examined by an Arab League committee but Iraq did not pursue the idea. Nevertheless, despite Asad's protestations, there may have been something of a Syrian connection, if only an indirect one on the following lines. A number of Saddam's associates[7] favoured a loose federation with Syria as a means of checking Saddam's rise to absolute power: a proposal then being canvassed in Damascus and Baghdad was that Bakr might be the federation's head, Asad his deputy and Saddam number three. Suspecting that a tie with Syria would limit his power, Saddam set about torpedoing the federal idea. When Asad came to Baghdad on 16 June 1979 to take the union idea further Saddam in a clear snub did not trouble to go to the airport to meet him. Very probably those Iraqis who feared Saddam secretly discussed with Damascus how best to check his rise, arguing that he posed as much of a problem to Asad as to themselves. Bakr for one sent Asad a private plea to speed up union negotiations because 'there is a current here which is anxious to kill the union in the bud before it bears fruit'.[8] Getting wind of these soundings Saddam ousted Bakr, killed off the waverers, and broke with Syria: it was the only certain way of becoming number one.

The emergence of the Islamic Republic put paid once and for all to any hope of a Syrian-Iraqi entente and in fact greatly sharpened their antagonisms, for just as Asad welcomed the Ayatollah so the Iraqi leader feared him. On almost every aspect of the Iranian situation – the Shah, the Ayatollah, Shi'ism, or whether or not the Arabs could live in good neighbourly relations with Iran – Syria and Iraq held opposing views. And of these the awakening of the Shi'a across the region was the main underlying issue. A community which Asad had come to value, Saddam saw as a deadly danger to the integrity of his country.

Iraq had never been a homogeneous state. Carved out of three ex-Ottoman provinces by Britain in 1921, it included rebellious Kurds in the northern mountains, unfavoured Shi'i Arab tribes in the south, and in between a Sunni Arab minority virtually monopolizing political power. Under-represented at the centre, Kurds and Shi'a were always centrifugal forces of great disruptiveness. In the 1960s and 1970s the Kurds took to arms against Baghdad, but the Shi'a were also a security threat, if a less overt one. They had begun to stir after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 and moved into something like outright opposition ten years later when the Ba'th seized power in 1968. To keep the Shi'a down the Iraqi Ba'th accused their 'highest authority',

Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, of being a CIA agent, causing him to flee for his life shortly before his death in 1970.

Khomayni, himself exiled for opposition to a repressive ruler, came in 1965 to the Iraqi holy city of Najaf, a centre of Shi'i piety and scholarship where he spent the next thirteen years. In Najaf, in a Shi'i community smouldering with discontent, he was one of a group of influential *'ulama* – divines like the Iraqi Baqir al-Sadr and the Lebanese Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah and Muhammad Mahdi Shamseddin – who were to formulate and spread the Islamic revolutionary message. From the 1960s there also took shadowy shape in Iraq an underground extremist Shi'i party, the *Da'wa al-Islamiya* (The Islamic Call), not directly connected with these *'ulama* but feeding on the revivalism they inspired.

In October 1978 Saddam Husayn made the fatal mistake of expelling Khomayni from Iraq – less than four months before he was to triumph in Tehran. The *Da'wa* now began to stage demonstrations and throw bombs. On 1 April 1980 its terrorists nearly killed Deputy Premier Tariq 'Aziz at a student gathering in Baghdad, a prelude to a rash of assaults on government officials. Saddam's immediate response was to crush the *Da'wa* and indeed any expression of Shi'i dissent in a campaign of arrests, torture, executions and forced deportations. On 8 April all members of the *Da'wa* were retroactively condemned to death and on the same day the scholarly Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr (who had been under arrest since June 1979) was hanged together with his sister, the novelist and Islamic feminist Bint al-Huda.[9] Tens of thousands of others whose loyalty was suspect were simply dumped across the frontier with Iran, in what in restrospect might be seen as the opening shots of the Gulf War. To Saddam Husayn, Shi'i dissidence raised the spectre that the south of Iraq, with the great port of Basra and the Shi'i holy places of Najaf and Karbala, might break away from the Iraqi state.

Asad's view of the world of Shi'i Islam was altogether more favourable than Saddam's. The Shi'a in Asad's Levant environment were overwhelmingly the deprived peasants of South Lebanon who for generations had worked the tobacco fields of absentee landowning families – very much as the 'Alawis had done in his youth. The struggle of rural Shi'a for a greater stake in a Lebanese state dominated by Christian and Sunni notables was a replica of his own struggle in Syria. On one occasion in the early 1980s a deputation of Beirut Sunni leaders asked Asad for help against the invading hordes of Shi'i peasants who were changing the character of their city. Asad was unsympathetic: he reminded his visitors that he was himself a peasant who had overturned the power of urban notables.

His friendship with the Lebanese Shi'i leader, the Imam Musa al-Sadr, added a personal reason for siding with the Shi'a, and this Musa al-Sadr was none other than the cousin and brother-in-law of Baqir al-Sadr whom Saddam Husayn hanged in 1980. It was hardly surprising therefore that the Shi'i question hung like a poisoned sword between Damascus and Baghdad.

The 'wrong war'

All these contentions apart, at the end of the day Asad and Saddam broke with each other because they were totally at odds over who was the Arabs' main enemy. Asad's attention was fixed on the threat from Israel, while Saddam was totally preoccupied with Iran. Facing in different directions, one towards the Mediterranean and the other towards the Gulf, Syria and Iraq inevitably had different perceptions of the dangers threatening them.

Asad was aghast when on 22 September 1980 Iraqi forces crossed in strength into Iran, launching the Gulf War on its murderous course. There was no clean start to hostilities, seeing that in the previous eight months some eighty skirmishes had been reported up and down the frontier, with loss of life and damage to property on both sides.[10] The propaganda battle over the air waves had started up almost immediately after the triumph of the Iranian revolution in early 1979. These messy beginnings were to make it difficult to apportion blame for starting the conflict – as it turned out, an important issue in ending it – although few could dispute that Iraq's invasion in late September marked the escalation into all-out war of what had been a mere border conflict.

From the very first Asad condemned Saddam's war as the wrong war against the wrong enemy at the wrong time. To fight Iran was folly: it would exhaust the Arabs, fragment their ranks and divert them from 'the holy battle in Palestine'.[11] Instead of making an enemy of revolutionary Iran, the Arabs should do all they could to prevent it falling back into Israel's clutches. In contacts with the kings of Saudi Arabia and Jordan, Asad tried to bring pressure on Saddam to stop the conflict. This was and remained his public position. He detested the war on principle, but if it had to happen his private worry was that Iraq might win a quick victory, as most observers were then predicting – a terrible outcome which would trap him between a triumphant Israel and a triumphant Iraq, both of them hostile to him. So, anxious to avert an Iraqi victory which could complete his encirclement, Asad

took the plunge. It had been daring enough to welcome Khomayni's Iran before the war – a move which had required much explaining to the Saudis and others – but now he decided to go further and back Iran's war effort.

On a visit to Moscow shortly after the outbreak of war he issued a joint statement with Brezhnev supporting 'Iran's inalienable right to determine its destiny independently and without any foreign influence'.[12] The Russians, happy to see the United States expelled from Iran, which for them was the big bonus of the revolution, gave Syria and Libya permission to sell on Soviet weapons to Iran. There were immediate reports of an arms airlift from Syria by way of Greece, Bulgaria and the Soviet Union and from Libya over the Black Sea, using as carriers the Shah's large fleet of Boeing 747, 727 and 707 aircraft.[13] In January 1981, Iran established scheduled air links with Damascus, Tripoli and Algiers, a more than symbolic switch from the daily El Al flights which had connected Israel to Iran before the revolution.

Links of another sort were also developing between Syria and Iran. From mid-1979 onwards Iranian volunteers began passing through Syria on their way to Lebanon, where they proposed fighting Israel and its proxies. Syria thus became the staging post between the fount of militant Shi'ism in Iran and the now aroused Shi'i community in Lebanon. Moreover, as Asad was convinced that Iraq was lending covert aid to the Muslim Brothers challenging him in Syria, he instructed his intelligence services to join Iran in mounting subversive missions against Iraq. One way or another – in arms supply, intelligence sharing, irregular operations and propaganda – Syria soon found itself up to its neck in the Gulf War on the Iranian side.

Saddam Husayn's response was not slow in coming. In August 1980 Iraqi forces stormed the Syrian embassy in Baghdad and expelled most of its staff on the charge that they were smuggling guns and explosives to Saddam's Shi'i enemies, and on 12 October Baghdad broke off relations with Damascus in a torrent of denunciation. Saddam then trumpeted in his media every damaging charge made by Asad's enemies: that he had surrendered Qunaytra to Israel without a fight in 1967, that he had cravenly asked for a ceasefire on the second day of the 1973 war, that he had intervened in Lebanon in 1976 in collusion with Washington and Jerusalem, that he bore on his conscience the massacre of Palestinians at Tal al-Za'tar, and that he had conspired to destroy the projected union between Syria and Iraq in 1979. Syria replied in kind in the familiar currency of Arab invective.

The more hostile Saddam became, the more Asad relied on Iran to

make sure that the Iraqi leader he had come to hate did not survive the war. Asad's attitude to the war was thus ambivalent: it was the 'wrong war' and yet, as his feud with Saddam deepened, he could not welcome a settlement which left Saddam in place. In other words, he was against the war but wanted it to continue until it produced an outcome to his satisfaction – a position not unlike that of some other countries. In 1982 Asad closed the border with Iraq as well as the pipeline carrying Iraqi oil across his territory and signed with Iran an extensive trade pact which for several years thereafter secured oil for Syria at preferential rates.

As the Gulf War ground on, large numbers of black-shrouded Iranian women were to be seen in Damascus, many of them widows or mothers of fallen men who were given a package tour to Syria to ease their suffering. Most journeyed to the Shi'i shrine of Sayidah Zaynab outside Damascus to say a prayer at the tomb of the Prophet's granddaughter. In preparation for closer ties, Iran's Foreign Minister, Dr 'Ali Akbar Velayati, came to Damascus on New Year's eve, 1981. In his hotel room that night he was shocked to observe that Syrian television took its viewers on a tour of the city's floor shows, celebrating with suitable revelry the end of one year and the beginning of another. To the faint embarrassment of Syrian officials, Velayati opened the official proceedings the next morning with a tirade against the flimsily clad dancers he had seen on television. It was an early lesson in the susceptibilities of their new ally, for by this time Syria and Iran were strategic partners.

The role of Israel

Israel watched developments in the relationship between Iran and the Arabs as closely as Syria did – and with much the same motives if from the opposite point of view. Just as Asad sought support from Iran, so Begin worried that he might get it. A perennial Israeli concern was to prevent a concentration of Arab strength, in particular to break up any sort of Arab 'eastern front' such as Asad was constantly trying to put together. Much of the rationale for Israel's friendship with the Shah had been precisely to neutralize Iraq, dissuade it from joining up with Syria and divert its growing military capability away from Israel. In the Shah's day Israel supplied Iran with agricultural expertise and more importantly with weapons and training for the armed services and for SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, in exchange for oil. Israel also joined Iran in covert operations against Arab targets. For example, from the

mid-1960s onwards it helped arm and train Kurdish guerrillas to harass the Baghdad government on the argument that if Iraq was pinned down at home, it would have no energy to spare to help Syria against Israel. So the bond with Iran was of strategic importance to Israel and Israeli leaders over the years from Ben Gurion to Begin paid numerous secret visits to Tehran.[14] The 70,000 strong Iranian Jewish community also helped provide a bridge between the two countries in much the same way as the influential Moroccan Jewish community helped forge discreet links between Israel and King Hasan.

The Shah's troubles in 1978 were therefore cause for alarm in Israel, an alarm compounded by the Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation of November that year effected as a riposte to Camp David. Just when Israel's Iranian ally was collapsing, the dreaded Arab eastern front seemed to be taking shape. In the event, it was soon evident that Israel had little to fear on this score, but the fall of the Shah was nevertheless a major setback and was further aggravated by Asad's prompt moves to supplant Israel as Iran's regional ally.

However, from Israel's point of view these unfavourable developments were soon offset by the growing tension between Iran and Iraq, and the opening this presented for Israeli action. Revolutionary Iran needed arms and, no longer able to get them from the United States, was looking for alternative supplies. Israel was happy to oblige, seeing in the arms trade an opportunity to establish a secret relationship with the mullahs. In 1980 Begin quietly resumed sales of military equipment to Iran beginning with spares for F-4 fighter planes.[15] The *demi-monde* of the arms bazaar provided intermediaries for this sensitive traffic between two ostensible enemies. Begin was aware that, with American hostages still held in the Tehran embassy, Washington would not look kindly on such trade, but the attraction of restoring the old Israel-Iran alliance was very great. When the Carter Administration got wind of Israel's arms sales it protested vigorously,[16] whereupon they were halted for a few months. But in November 1980 after Reagan's election they were resumed.

Anxious to fend off American anger, Israel got Morris Amitay of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee to ask Richard Allen, shortly to be named Reagan's national security adviser, how the incoming Administration would view Israel's shipment of US-made aircraft parts to Iran.[17] And a few weeks later on Reagan's inauguration, the director general of Israel's Foreign Ministry, David Kimche, hurried to Washington to persuade the Administration of the benefits of selling arms to Iran – or at least of letting Israel do so. Arms sales, he argued, were a means of making contact with the Iranian military in

preparation for the post-Khomayni era,[18] they would strengthen Iranian 'moderates' and weaken Soviet influence in Iran – arguments used by Israel to conceal its own motives and which were a few years later to suck the United States into the 'Irangate' scandal. Before the end of January 1981 the new Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, privately gave Israel the permission it sought.[19] And once the hostages were out, Israel's covert arms transfers to Iran mushroomed in 1981 to include tank and artillery ammunition, spare parts for US-built M-48 tanks, refurbished jet engines and other systems for the F-4s, the F-5s and the F-14 Tomcats, a trade of tens of millions of dollars which was to grow to billions over the coming years, shrugging off all Washington's attempts to staunch it.

Israel's self-interest was to stoke the fires of the Iran-Iraq War. The conflict exhausted two potential adversaries, drained Arab oil wealth and provided Israel's arms trade with valuable export outlets. But all along Begin had Asad's Syria in his sights. This was the main regional enemy to be neutralized. From his point of view, the Gulf War and the Egypt-Israel peace treaty served the same purpose of ensuring Israel's supremacy over Syria and the whole Levant. The peace treaty had removed Egypt from the confrontation, the Gulf War removed Iraq.

Israel not only primed the pump of the Gulf conflict but appears to have had a hand in getting it started – for the same self-serving reasons. Much of the information which led Saddam Husayn to invade very probably came by indirect routes from Israel. In deciding to attack Saddam Husayn was influenced by intelligence estimates of Iran's weakness reaching him by way of Saudi Arabia and the United States and from Iranian exiles in Paris and Baghdad, many of them ex-officials of the Shah who dreamed only of ousting the mullahs and returning home in triumph. Reports circulating at the time spoke, for example, of total chaos in Iran's armed services and in the officer corps in particular. About a hundred senior officers had been shot, hundreds more had been jailed, and over ten thousand had been dismissed. Elite formations such as the Imperial Guard and the Immortals Brigade had been disbanded, while what remained of the regular army was locked in conflict with the new Revolutionary Guard Corps. The army was said to be down to six under-strength divisions, little more than brigades, while the air force had lost half its pilots and was running out of spares – and what spares there were could not be located because the American-supplied computers had broken down.

So parlous did Iran's situation seem that Saddam was convinced he could overthrow Khomayni within a week. He sent word to the ruler of Kuwait that General Gholam 'Ali Oveysi, the former martial law

Governor of Tehran then in exile in Baghdad, could be in Tehran within days.[20] Saddam did not know that some of these over-confident estimates of Iran's weakness were of Israeli origin.

Exiles such as Oveysi had close ties with Israel dating from before the revolution, while the United States at this time relied almost exclusively on Israel to monitor the unfolding drama in Iran. As Carter's CIA chief Admiral Stansfield Turner was to admit, US intelligence assets in Iran had atrophied in the Shah's last years.[21] After the Shah's fall 'we had nothing in Iran. We had no idea of what was going on', Major-General Richard Secord, who had been in charge of US arms sales to the Iranian air force, was to tell the Iran-Contra congressional hearings in 1987.[22] Although Israel's own networks were disrupted by the revolution – 25,000 Iranian Jews had left the country in the early weeks – its information was still better than anyone else's. In assessing the Iranian situation, it was natural that Washington should turn for help to its Israeli ally. Such was the dependence that, in planning the rescue of the American hostages in Tehran, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General David Jones, sought the advice of Israel's Chief of Staff, General Rafael Eitan.[23] Israel was thus in a strong position to feed information which suited its purpose to Baghdad.

The Iranians had an inkling of Israeli involvement in the run-up to the war. President Bani-Sadr told Eric Rouleau of *Le Monde* that Iran had been forewarned of the Iraqi attack by an intelligence report of secret talks in Paris in the summer of 1980 in which Israeli and US military experts, Iranian exiles and Iraqis had taken part.[24]

Interests in the war

A lot of people had an interest in stirring up the Gulf War. While Israel was largely concerned with its long-term security, the United States was preoccupied with the American captives held in Tehran since November 1979. With every passing day exasperation grew in Washington and the idea took root among the more belligerent members of the Administration such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, that they would be released only by military means. First, brushing aside the qualms of Secretary Vance, Brzezinski forced through the American rescue mission which ended in fiasco at Tabas in the Iranian desert in April 1980. Then, undeterred by failure and by Vance's resignation, he set about planning a second round,[25] but, seeing that the United States could not itself do the job,

he came to believe that an Iraqi attack provided the best means of prising the hostages free. There were several pointers to Brzezinski's preference for military action over negotiation. When the hostages were first seized two Iranian brothers, Cyrus and Muhammad 'Ali Hashemi, hammered out an arms-for-hostages deal with the State Department which Assistant Secretary Harold Saunders thought promising enough to recommend to Cyrus Vance. But Brzezinski kept raising so many fresh issues that when news broke of the rescue mission, the Hashemi brothers came to believe he had been playing for time. The same thing happened in the weeks before the outbreak of the Gulf War: Brzezinski appeared to lose interest in negotiations, leading the Hashemis to conclude that he had foreknowledge of the war and had placed his hopes in it.[26]

In going to war Saddam Husayn was also spurred on by Arab friends. Alarmed at the impact of the Iranian revolution on the Gulf and badly shaken by the seizure of the Grand Mosque at Mecca by Muslim extremists in November 1979, the Saudi royal house looked to Iraq to contain Khomayni's Iran. Equally King Husayn of Jordan, anxious to protect his close ties with the Gulf rulers, saw Iran as a deadly threat[27] and urged Iraq to stand firm. From the moment war was declared Husayn opened his port of Aqaba to Iraqi war supplies and depleted his arms stocks on Iraq's behalf.

But whatever foreign hands were at work, Saddam had his own reasons for challenging the Ayatollah. His most pressing motive was almost certainly defensive and his war might best be described as pre-emptive: Khomayni's Shi'i *revanchisme* was so threatening to the integrity of his country that the temptation to strike a quick blow while Iran was dizzy with revolutionary turmoil was probably irresistible. Saddam's second motive was to tear up the 1975 Algiers Agreement which, extorted from him under the pressure of the Kurdish war, had forced him to yield to the Shah partial control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway. Now he resolved to return the Shatt to exclusive Iraqi control: as the Shah had found it intolerable for Iranian vessels to have to fly the Iraqi flag as they came up the Shatt to the Iranian ports of Abadan and Khorramshahr, so Saddam longed to make Iran again acknowledge his sovereignty over the whole waterway. Behind Saddam's obsession with the Shatt was a sense of grievance at Iraq's minuscule Gulf frontage compared to Iran's sprawl along the whole of the opposite shore.

Ambition also played a part in Saddam's war. Iraq's oil and water resources, its fertile land and the benefits of his own strong leadership seemed to mark it out for greatness at a time when its rivals were

enfeebled: Syria paralysed by internal terrorism, Egypt out of the Arab game, Turkey in the hands of a military junta after years of anarchy. Was this not Iraq's moment? When Saddam demanded that Iran grant autonomy to the Arabs of Khuzistan (a partly Arabic-speaking province brought under central control by the Shah's father) and return three small islands in the Strait of Hormuz seized by the Shah in 1971, he was making a bid to be the Arabs' champion.

Saddam was persuaded that the blow he planned to strike against Iran was risk-free and well-timed. But within a very few weeks this was seen to be a misjudgement. His invasion ran out of steam, Iran regrouped its forces, and by late October 1980 the Gulf War had become the static slogging match it was to remain for eight years, draining away Saddam's ambitions and much else besides. Brzezinski's hopes that the conflict would release the hostages also proved vain. (It was only when the war was stalemated that serious negotiations between the United States and Iran took place through the good offices of Algeria and reached a successful conclusion on 20 January 1981, the day of Ronald Reagan's inauguration.)

As the war ran its course Syria and Israel continued to compete for Iran's favour, thus extending the Arab-Israeli dispute from the Levant to the Gulf. Israel hoped its arms sales to Iran would eventually build a community of interest between them, while Syria, despite pressure from Arab opinion and Sunni establishments, especially in Arabia and the Gulf states, saw no reason to depart from its view that revolutionary Iran must be embraced as an ally.

For neither country was the wooing of Iran a trouble-free policy, and for both gains had to be set against considerable costs. Israel was forced to lie about its arms sales, then face the indignity of public exposure when the Iran-Contra scandal revealed how far it had dragged its American ally into the quagmire of secret dealings with Iran. Asad in turn faced Arab and Sunni criticisms for taking sides with Iran and with the Shi'a and saw his Arab nationalist commitment questioned. Precious financial aid from the Arab Gulf states was much reduced. When in a later phase of the war Iran threatened Kuwait and other Gulf statelets, his claim that his leverage with Tehran protected them from danger looked hollow. But in spite of these costs and embarrassments, he resisted all entreaties to reconsider his fundamental Iranian option.

He was consoled by the fact that his controversial alignment with Iran and Shi'ism brought him two important bonuses: first, the Damascus-Tehran axis which, by freeing him from pressures from Iraq, allowed him to focus all his defences on the Israeli threat; and second

the axis of Damascus and the Shi'a of Lebanon, which put at his disposal powerful proxy forces of decisive effect in the coming duel with Begin.

22

Battle with Menachem Begin

Asad and Begin, champions of irreconcilable visions, came to blows, as they were bound some time to do, over Lebanon in what was to be the goriest engagement of the struggle for the Middle East. Lebanon in the 1980s was the hapless arena for the collision between the dominant and expanded Israel which Begin was determined to build and the rival regional order with which Asad tried to stop him. Each man recognized the other as the principal enemy who could put at risk everything he held dear. In shorthand terms, 'Greater Israel' went to war against 'Greater Syria', both controversial concepts of uncertain definition but which certainly ruled each other out. The struggle, in a way the climax of their political lives, very nearly destroyed them both.

They were unevenly matched. At the start of the 1980s Asad was weak, still battling for his life against his Islamic enemies at home, while Begin was at the height of his powers. Moreover, Asad's Levant security doctrine was looking threadbare: he was on extremely bad terms with Jordan, he was struggling without notable success to discipline the Palestinian resistance movement, and in Lebanon he had failed to pacify the country in five years of effort or to limit Israel's involvement with the Christians.

In contrast, Begin could contemplate the results of his first term of office with a good deal of self-congratulation. The peace treaty had taken care of Egypt, while the Gulf War was taking care of Iraq, leaving him with great freedom of action. His hold over the Sinai peninsula provided him with a trump card: he had agreed at Camp David to return Sinai to Egypt, but not fully until April 1982 and, so long as he retained a large slice, no one could be absolutely certain that Egypt would get it back. Wary of upsetting the timetable, the United States and Egypt dared not stand up to him. Their fears were groundless: nothing on earth would have prevented Begin from returning Sinai, since peace with Egypt was the bedrock of his strategy

for retaining the West Bank. But this was not widely understood.

Begin's biggest asset was the new American President. From the moment of Ronald Reagan's inauguration in January 1981, even from the moment of his election the previous November, the Israelis sensed a propitious change of climate after the uneasy Carter years. Unlike Carter, Reagan had no interest in Palestinian aspirations and to Begin's satisfaction allowed the autonomy talks to peter out. Begin heartily approved of the Administration's robust anti-Soviet stance, which upgraded Israel's value as a 'strategic asset', and its obsession with 'international terrorism'.

Terrorism preoccupied the Reagan Administration from the start, perhaps not surprisingly since the long incarceration of Americans in the Tehran embassy had done much to destroy Carter and ensure Reagan's election, and the attempted assassinations of the president and of the Pope in 1981 served to increase alarm. Right-wing Republicans in the new team saw a Soviet hand behind every manifestation of anti-Western sentiment. Reagan, Haig, and the CIA chief William Casey gave credence to reports by the American journalist Claire Sterling in *The Terror Network* (1981) of tens of thousands of terrorists, sponsored directly or indirectly by Moscow, being trained in guerrilla camps across the world as 'elite battalions in a worldwide Army of Communist Combat'.[1] The Cubans had a big role in it, but so did the Palestinians – the 'second great magnetic pole for apprentice terrorists'. Intelligence professionals knew that Sterling was talking nonsense, but Begin was happy to encourage the White House and the State Department to see terrorism as the main scourge of the modern world, and Syria, Libya and the PLO as its main practitioners as well, of course, as Soviet proxies.

In the new Administration the Israelis' best hope was the Secretary of State, General Alexander Haig, the excitable soldier-politician who had learned his diplomacy as Kissinger's assistant in the Nixon White House. On his first visit to the Middle East as Secretary in the spring of 1981, Haig offended Asad by deliberately omitting Syria from his itinerary, and denounced the Syrian leader so harshly as a Soviet proxy that his Israeli hosts came to believe Syria was fair game. Haig seemed reassuringly unconcerned about the substance of the Arab-Israeli dispute, pursuing instead the will-o'-the-wisp of a regional 'strategic consensus' against the Soviet Union. Fostering presidential ambitions of his own, Haig was impressed by Israel's muscle in American domestic politics and was much influenced by a pro-Israeli State Department aide, Harvey Sicherman. Indeed so great seemed the concordance of interest between Washington and Jerusalem, so secure

the levels of aid, so well-placed Israel's supporters in Congress and the Administration, that Begin came to believe, with some justice, that he could get the United States to tolerate anything he chose to do.

Begin's messianic mission was to unite and make whole the 'Land of Israel' by permanently absorbing into the Jewish state the territories he insisted on calling by the biblical names of Judea and Samaria – in other words the West Bank. To realize this vision meant peopling the West Bank with Jewish settlers and crushing every manifestation of Palestinian nationalism. When he first came to power in 1977 Begin put his bulldozing Minister of Agriculture, General Ariel Sharon, in charge of a crash programme of settlement building. Begin's reading of the bargain struck at Camp David was that, by agreeing to return Sinai to Egypt, he had won a free hand on the West Bank. His success in outwitting both Carter and Sadat appeared to have bred in him a large measure of hubris, leading him to believe that he could safely embark on further expansion.

To make his cherished enterprise safe, however, Begin needed a protected environment. His bold solution was to change the strategic balance of the region, a process which had begun with the removal of Egypt from the battlefield. But this did not resolve the problem altogether. Two enemies remained without whose subjugation Begin could not be certain of lasting success: first there was the PLO, the embodiment of Palestinian nationalism, and then there was Syria, the old opponent to the north, the state marked out by history and geography as the obstacle to the satisfaction of Begin's land hunger and the realization of Israel's regional dominance. Begin did not seek peace with the Palestinians or the Syrians, as he had sought peace with Egypt, because peace involved surrendering captured territory. He wanted to hold the West Bank to complete Eretz Israel, and he needed to retain the Golan in order to protect it. But to hang on to these Arab territories required unchallengeable strength, the key to which lay in containing or, if necessary, defeating Syria. Getting Egypt out had been the aim of Begin's first term as prime minister. Neutralizing Syria became the objective of his second term.

The missile crisis

Such was the context for the first passage of arms between Asad and Begin – the so-called Lebanese missile crisis which opened in April 1981.

The crisis grew out of a struggle for control of the Biqa' valley held

by Syria since 1976 and which it considered vital for its defence: the Biqa' was a possible Israeli invasion route and the Damascus-Beirut highway, Syria's lifeline to Lebanon, ran across it. Some months earlier, in December 1980, Christian militiamen allied to Israel had moved into Zahla, the valley's principal town. Such a Christian bridgehead was a threat Asad could not tolerate. His fierce response was to shell Zahla as well as Christian East Beirut and to send commandos to capture strongpoints in the mountains from where he could put further pressure on the Christian heartlands to the north.

Bashir Jumayil, younger son of the Phalanges party founder Shaykh Pierre Jumayil, was the man behind the challenge to Asad. He was said to have been recruited by the CIA when working for a Washington law firm in the early 1970s, and the CIA had in due course introduced him to its Israeli counterpart, Mossad,[2] which was now grooming him for a role as Israel's proconsul in Lebanon. Since the Lebanon civil war he had managed by intimidation and assassination to unite the various Maronite gunmen into a single militia under his command known as the 'Lebanese Forces'. Israel's regional ambitions coincided with Bashir's local ambitions to re-establish Christian dominance in Lebanon.

Israel's contacts with the Christians, seen as its natural allies against Syria and the Palestinians, had greatly expanded since 1976: in the south it openly maintained a Christian border force, while covertly arming, funding and training Bashir's fighters in the northern mountains. An Israeli-Christian alliance was not a new idea, but had attracted both communities since the 1930s in a common fear of the Muslim Arab hinterland. After 1948 the notion that Israel should intervene to redraw Lebanon's borders, seize the south up to the Litani river and encourage the emergence of a friendly Maronite state further north was repeatedly canvassed, notably by David Ben Gurion in 1954 (in his well publicized exchanges with the more cautious Moshe Sharett).[3] But not until the Lebanese civil war of the 1970s did it become practical politics, when Israel started making wider commitments to the Maronites culminating in Begin's promise in 1978, repeated in 1980, to commit the Israeli air force on their side if Syria used its air power against them.[4]

After establishing his strongpoint at Zahla, Bashir in a bid to extend his domain in the early weeks of 1981 brought in bulldozers to build a road connecting the town to Christian Mount Lebanon. Perhaps he gambled on precipitating an Israeli-Syrian clash which he could turn to his advantage. When Asad took up his challenge, shelling Zahla and sending commandos into the mountains, Bashir appealed to Begin for

help. Begin urged him to stand firm and then, in honour of his pledge, ordered the IAF north to take on the Syrian air force. On 28 April 1981 two Syrian helicopters ferrying supplies up to their troops were shot down. The following day Asad moved Soviet-built surface-to-air missiles into the Biqa'. The missile crisis had begun.

Begin's instinct was to destroy the SAMs at once, but for a variety of reasons he did not do so. He was busy campaigning for the general elections to be held at the end of June, not a time to go to war. His close associate, Ariel Sharon, did not want war until he himself could take charge of the Defence Ministry, a post Begin had promised him if Likud won the election. The military intelligence chief, Yehoshua Saguy, also recommended caution. But a more substantial reason was probably that, as part of his election campaign, Begin had a spectacular coup up his sleeve and did not want to blunt its impact by opening another front.

On 7 June, in a military and public relations *tour de force*, Israeli aircraft destroyed the French-built Osirak nuclear reactor near Baghdad. For decades Israel had sought to deny the Arabs access to advanced weapons technology – for example, it had carried out acts of terrorism against German scientists working on Egypt's missile programme in the 1960s. But the strike against Iraq, involving a 1,000-km flight by fourteen aircraft over hostile Arab territory, went far beyond this precedent, vastly extending Israel's security frontiers and affirming its intentions to be the sole nuclear power in the region. The prestigious surgical operation helped put Begin back in office three weeks later.

Perhaps the main factor deterring Begin from attacking the SAMs in the Biqa', however, was uncertainty about the American reaction. In spite of his enormous influence over the Reagan Administration, his aggressive behaviour was beginning to meet some resistance. He had embarked on a long tussle with the White House over its plans to sell five AWACS (airborne warning and command systems) to Saudi Arabia, a struggle which was to last much of the year. In October 1981 Reagan at last won consent from the Senate, but the vote was so narrow and the engagement with the Israeli lobby so bruising that the outcome was paradoxically seen as a victory for Begin. The Osirak raid also strained Israel's credit in Washington. While there was considerable sympathy for Begin's motives, there was also annoyance that Israel had used American satellite photography to plan the raid and American-built aircraft and 'smart' bombs to carry it out. The United States condemned the action in the Security Council, but applied no sanctions save to suspend for a few weeks delivery of four more F-16s, the type of aircraft which had carried out the raid. So, when the Syrian missile crisis blew up, Begin prudently decided not to try the Americans further but to accept Washington's suggestion that a presidential envoy, Ambassador Philip Habib, attempt through diplomacy to remove the offending SAMs.

Habib battled throughout the early summer of 1981 to douse the fires in Lebanon. Not only did he need to defuse the dangerous Asad-Begin contest over the SAMs, but he had simultaneously to wrestle with a major flare up in the old conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. For, as if to compensate for the restraint he was showing over Syria's missiles, Begin unleashed his air force and navy in late May and early June against Palestinian positions. When, to his apparent disappointment, this failed to draw PLO fire, he attacked more savagely from 10 July onwards. After five days of Israeli pounding, the Palestinians at last opened up with rocket and artillery fire against Galilee settlements, whereupon, on 17 July, the IAF mounted a twenty-minute raid on the western suburbs of Beirut where the PLO offices were located. About 200 Palestinians and Lebanese were killed and another 700 wounded amid heavy damage to property, to which the PLO responded with more shelling of northern Israel, killing 6 and wounding 59.

This was the unpromising situation from which Habib, with painstaking effort and the assistance of the Saudis, managed to stitch together on 24 July a three-sided 'understanding' between Begin, Asad and 'Arafat.

The essence of the deal was that Syria would keep its missiles in place in the Biqa', but on the understanding that they would not be fired; Israel would continue reconnaissance flights over Lebanon, but would not attack the missiles; and Israel and the Palestinians would stop hitting each other across the Lebanese border, with Asad guaranteeing Palestinian good behaviour. Begin tried to widen the scope of the deal to ban Palestinian attacks on Israeli targets anywhere in the world, but Habib explicitly made clear to him that the understanding was limited to actions originating in Lebanon.[5] In putting this deal together, Habib was not allowed direct contact with 'Arafat – Kissinger's pledge to Israel forbade it – so messages were passed to and fro through the Syrians or the Saudis (often in the person of Crown Prince Fahd's emissary, Shaykh 'Aziz al-Tuwayjari, deputy commander of the National Guard), a roundabout route which did not prevent Begin suspiciously quizzing Habib every time they met on whether he had spoken to the PLO. 'In the end nothing was put in writing but everybody understood what had been agreed', Habib summed up later.

Asad in Damascus felt some momentary satisfaction. The crisis marked his re-entry into the big league of international diplomacy after his exclusion from the peace process four years earlier by Sadat's visit to Jerusalem. He had emerged from the bunker to which the Islamic terrorists had confined him, defied Begin and managed to retain his missiles in Lebanon. He had started a dialogue with the United States. The 'understanding' Habib had negotiated was not an Israeli *diktat* but seemed to him an expression of an American-approved balance of power. To Asad's way of thinking it was a long-overdue step in the right direction.

But Asad had got the wrong signal. Such was Begin's bellicose mood in the summer of 1981 that Asad was lucky not to face an Israeli assault. Perhaps not realizing that the amiable Habib, an American of Lebanese origin, did not reflect the reality of the Administration's indifference to Syria and its commitment to Israel, Asad overestimated Washington's will to restrain Begin. Nor did he wholly appreciate that, to Begin's way of thinking, Habib had forced Israel to make unacceptable compromises: the SAMs in the Biqa' continued to rankle; and in southern Lebanon the hated Palestinians had won a breathing space in which to build up their military strength. More deplorably from Begin's point of view, Habib had given 'Arafat *political* status and, with the ceasefire, Israel had come within an inch of recognizing the 'terrorists'. For the main fear of Israeli hard-liners was not of PLO militancy but of PLO moderation which might force Israel to negotiate – and therefore to make concessions. Yet, for all Begin's objections, Habib's arrangements kept the peace for the next eleven months until Begin would be restrained no longer. His appointment with Asad and 'Arafat was only temporarily deferred.

In October 1981 the shock of Sadat's assassination distracted both American and Israeli attention from Lebanon, but in November Ariel Sharon and US Defense Secretary Weinberger signed a Memorandum of Understanding on strategic co-operation which Sharon at least saw as enhancing his freedom of action against the PLO and Syria. The MOU contributed to persuading the Israeli hawks – not just Begin and Sharon but Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan, Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir, and Ambassador Moshe Arens in Washington – that American support for whatever action they envisaged would be forthcoming.

Then, in a high-handed move on 14 December 1981, Begin announced the annexation of the Golan Heights, no doubt in the hope of goading Asad into military action. An embarrassed Washington suspended the MOU, whereupon in a fit of rage Begin annulled it altogether, storming at the US ambassador, Samuel Lewis: 'Are we a banana republic?' Begin's anger could be explained by the fact that American objections to the annexation made an attack on Syria more difficult – if, that is, Asad had allowed himself to be provoked.

Asad could not mistake the signal from the Golan. By claiming it as part of the 'Land of Israel',[6] Begin contemptuously ruled out peace with Syria on the basis of a return of territory. Only capitulation was on offer. Asad read it as a declaration of war – but a war which he was in no condition to fight. He knew that if he made any military move whatsoever, Israel would seize the pretext to hit him, but doing nothing highlighted Syria's humiliating weakness. Asad had to content himself with denouncing the latest Israeli aggression and putting his case to the Security Council and to world leaders – with no tangible result. So he scrupulously observed the ceasefire on the Golan, made no military response to Begin's annexation, and never slackened his efforts to control the Palestinians in Lebanon who he feared would trigger off a conflict at a time not of his choosing.

These were extraordinarily anxious months for Asad as he measured the danger from Israel's hard-line team and the Arabs' chronic feebleness. With the signature of the US-Israel MOU, which he viewed with despondency, he knew how little he could rely on Washington to keep the peace. It was a moment of great frustration.

Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, the Druze chieftain, who with a handful of horsemen had fought the French army in the 1920s, was on his deathbed when Israel extended its law to the Golan, a traditional area of Druze settlement. His son, Mansur, was sitting by him one night when he heard the old man exclaim, 'God curse them!'

'Curse whom?' Mansur asked, thinking Sultan Pasha was referring to someone in the household.

'The Arabs!'

'What have the Arabs done?'

'Nothing! They do nothing! Israel takes their land and they don't move. They have planes, they have guns, they have money, but they do nothing! I spit on these rich Arabs!'[7]

Seeking a *casus belli*

In forming his second cabinet early in August 1981 Begin gave Ariel Sharon the post of Defence Minister which this brutal if brilliant maverick had long coveted. Putting the Israeli Defence Forces in the hands of a notorious Arab-hater and apostle of violence was a clear indication of Begin's intentions. He had three objectives. The first was

to annihilate the PLO in Lebanon, destroy it and root it out completely, in order to overcome West Bank resistance to Israeli rule. So the war he planned was essentially a war for the West Bank. But the absorption of the West Bank could not take place in a vacuum. To safeguard Eretz Israel, his second objective was to expel Syrian forces and Syrian influence from Lebanon. And thirdly he intended to instal Bashir Jumayil as president of Lebanon, a Maronite vassal who would sign a peace treaty with Israel. By wrenching Lebanon out of Asad's sphere of influence and into his own, Begin planned to neutralize Syria for good. His overall ambition was to reshape the region so as to allow the building of 'Greater Israel' free from external challenge. Sharon's task was to provide the military means to bring this about.

From his early days as commander of Unit 101, Sharon had built up a reputation as an advocate of bold offensive operations against the Arabs, a reputation consolidated by his Canal crossing in the October War. He maintained that Israel's security interests extended to a vast arc of countries from Turkey, Iraq and Pakistan down through the Persian Gulf and across north and central Africa.[8] He championed the notion that 'Jordan is Palestine', a slogan implying the expulsion of large numbers of Palestinians to Jordan and the overthrow of the monarchy there. No doubt he hoped the Lebanese campaign would provide the opportunity to implement this programme.

Within weeks he had devised a master plan, codenamed Operation Big Pines, far exceeding in scope the existing IDF contingency preparations against the PLO in Lebanon. He understood that the control of Beirut and the defeat of the Syrians were essential to the radical political objectives on which he and Begin were agreed. And the deed had to be done before Lebanon's presidential elections, due in September 1982. Israel had had a long history of covert destabilizing interventions in the Arab world,[9] but the use of the IDF to effect radical political change in an Arab state represented a departure from the vaunted tradition that Israel's wars were defensive or at a stretch pre-emptive. The coming conflict was to be, as Begin later admitted, 'a war by choice'.

However, as Begin and Sharon dared not be candid about their intentions, they had to resort to ruse and deception. Armed forays into Lebanon to protect Israel's northern settlements from cross-border attack, even unprovoked blows against the PLO, were by now tolerated by the Israeli public and international opinion. But an offensive war to destroy the PLO altogether, chase Syria out and remake the Lebanese political system could not be avowed – even to the IDF itself. A pretext for military action was needed.

The trouble was that Habib's ceasefire was holding and the northern frontier was quiet. So, disregarding the objections of their more cautious ministerial colleagues, Begin and Sharon again set about trying to provoke the Palestinians and the Syrians into the armed action which would be seen to justify a large-scale Israeli riposte. Five times between July 1981 and June 1982 Israel massed troops on the frontier, and five times stood them down because the pretext was insufficient and pressures from the cabinet and from Washington too compelling. Begin's warlike moves even managed to alarm Israeli inhabitants of the northern settlements who, far from clamouring for added protection, pleaded for the peace they were enjoying not to be disturbed.[10] It was characteristic of Begin's touchy chauvinism that he gave the Israeli cabinet a first preview of Big Pines on the very day of his angry exchange with Ambassador Sam Lewis over Washington's rebuke for the Golan annexation.

Nevertheless, Begin and Sharon preferred to have US approval for their attack, and made their pitch at their chief ally in the Administration, Secretary of State Haig. In Cairo for Sadat's funeral in October 1981, Begin told Haig that Israel might have to push the PLO back from the border area, but he assured him that care would be taken not to draw Syria into the conflict. Haig responded, 'If you move, you move alone'[11] – a wording curiously close to Lyndon Johnson's elliptical warning before the Six Day War: 'Israel will not be alone unless it decides to go alone', which in the event had not held Israel back.

Washington received a more specific foretaste of what was to come when, on 5 December, an aggressive and impatient Sharon outlined to Philip Habib his solution to the Palestine problem. Habib had returned to the region to explore the chances of expanding his Lebanese ceasefire into a political settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. But when he broached the subject he was given short shrift:[12]

> 'I'll show you how to deal with the Palestinians', Sharon roared. Spreading out a map of Lebanon in his office at the Defence Ministry in Tel Aviv, he punched at it with his fist here and there, to show how he planned to destroy the PLO and sweep the Palestinians out of Beirut, if not out of Lebanon altogether.

Such an attack was unthinkable, Habib protested. He reported the angry exchange to Haig in Washington, as did Ambassador Lewis.[13]

By his own testimony, Secretary Haig 'over and over again' and 'again and again' cautioned Israel against military action. But the limp

formula he used was that the United States would not approve an Israeli attack 'unless there [was] a major, internationally recognized provocation'.[14] Thus Haig sanctioned an attack on Lebanon if the PLO obligingly provided the pretext.

The two allies engaged in a prolonged debate about what would constitute an acceptable provocation, with Israel attempting to rewrite Habib's ceasefire terms, arguing that a Palestinian attack on an Israeli target anywhere in the world could give grounds for an invasion. In February 1982 Israel's military intelligence chief, Yehoshua Saguy, called on Haig in Washington to seek his support for such a redefinition, and Sharon came himself in May to put the case more forcefully. Without spelling out in full detail the scope of Big Pines, he explained how Lebanon could be rescued from Syria and restored to the 'free world', a programme much to Haig's liking. After the meeting Habib warned Haig that Sharon was going away with the wrong impression and he drafted a letter from Haig to Begin urging restraint, a letter Haig later adduced to deny that he had approved the invasion.[15] But in Habib's recollection Haig said and did nothing which could seriously have blunted Sharon's determination to invade. The maps of the planned offensive which he showed Haig were the same ones which had so alarmed Habib in Tel Aviv six months earlier.[16]

Asad was later to hold the United States as responsible as Israel for the carnage and destruction in Lebanon,[17] and not without justification. Although informed of Israeli intentions, at no time did the Administration issue a clear warning that in invading Lebanon Israel would forfeit American backing, and anything short of such an ultimatum could only be taken as a green light.[18] Collusion there was but, to allow for deniability, it was not made explicit. The effect was both to give Israel the clearance it wanted and to rob Washington of effective control over the subsequent course of the war. The US-Israel relationship, precisely because of the intimate interpenetration of the two countries, had spun out of control.

The invasion of Lebanon

When on 3 June 1982 Palestinian gunmen outside London's Dorchester Hotel shot and seriously wounded Israeli ambassador Shlomo Argov, Begin and Sharon grabbed at the opportunity to go to war. That this was not a breach of Habib's ceasefire did not deter them, nor did information from their intelligence that Argov's assailants were men of

Abu Nidal's faction, sworn enemy of the PLO leader, Yasser 'Arafat. 'Abu Nidal, Abu Shmidal', Chief of Staff Eitan scoffed, 'We have to strike at the PLO!'[19] Eitan's loathing for the Palestinians and eagerness to kill them were even greater than Sharon's.

Raring to go, Begin and Sharon had for weeks been trying to provoke the Palestinians into a fight. In April 1982 in response to a mine explosion in southern Lebanon, and in May after two explosive devices were found in Israel, Begin broke the ceasefire to bomb Palestinian targets in the evident hope that the guerrillas would hit back. But in April they held their fire and in May lobbed their shells into empty Galilee fields. On 4 June, however, following the attack on Argov, Begin sent the IAF to bomb West Beirut and southern Lebanon, causing dozens of casualties, and this time the PLO riposted by shelling northern Israel, killing one Israeli and wounding fifteen. This was the signal for an immense barrage of fire to be loosed on Palestinian camps from Israeli aircraft, long-range artillery and naval guns. Begin's Lebanon War had begun.

For public consumption Big Pines was rechristened 'Peace in Galilee' and its objective was said to be to push the PLO back forty kilometres from the Israeli frontier. Both the name and the declared scope of the operation were fictions.

On Sunday 6 June Israeli ground forces surged across the frontier: Israel's Northern Command under Major-General Amir Drori committed to battle a total of 76,000 men, 1,250 tanks, and 1,500 armoured personnel carriers, supported by the air force and navy. Opposite them were regular Syrian and PLA forces under Major-General Sa'id Bayraqdar of about 25,000 men, 300 tanks and 300 APCs, together with some 15,000 PLO fighters fielding a variety of hardware and belonging to at least eight separate guerrilla factions.[20]

Within forty hours, by the morning of 8 June, in a three-pronged strike up the Lebanese coast, into the central mountains, and northeast towards the Biqa', Israel routed the PLO and conquered much of southern Lebanon. The Palestinians had made the mistake of attempting to build conventional forces which could only be outmatched by the IDF. Had they trained and fought as genuine guerrillas, they could have given Israel more trouble. As it was, their best performance was in defending the camps of Rashidiya and 'Ayn al-Hilwa, outside Tyre and Sidon, which held out for days. The Palestinian civilian population was as much an Israeli target as the PLO fighters. From 5 June onwards every major refugee camp in southern Lebanon was subjected to saturation bombardment from land, sea and air, with the apparent intention of flattening the camps to make them permanently

uninhabitable. In annihilating the Palestinians Israel had eager Maronite encouragement. There had been a number of quiet American-Israeli-Maronite discussions in the months before the invasion about the future of Lebanon, in which Charles Malik, a former Lebanese foreign minister and foremost advocate of Lebanon's pro-Western and Christian Orientation, had played a prominent part.

In the Knesset Begin later defended the massive assault on civilians. When had the population of southern Lebanon suddenly become 'beautiful people', he asked with heavy sarcasm. Had they not harboured terrorists? Had not Israel driven one and a half million Egyptians from the Suez Canal zone during the war of attrition with Egypt? 'Not for one moment would I have any doubts that the civilian population deserves punishment.'[21] Palestinian prisoners taken were often forced to stand bound and blindfolded for days on end, were exposed to the sun and deprived of food and water, were frequently beaten and sometimes forced to perform their natural functions where they stood. Many were taken to Israel for incarceration, crammed into lorries and buses under the blows and insults of their guards or bundled together in nets and transported dangling from helicopters.[22]

It was now Asad's turn.

Asad had not expected to fight in Lebanon and did not want to do so. He was well aware that Israel was planning a strike – by the late spring so much was common knowledge, reinforced for him by Soviet warnings – but like the PLO he probably expected a repeat of the limited 1978 invasion. Ever since 1976 there had been a stand-off between Syria and Israel in Lebanon, with each tacitly tolerating the other's presence under the so-called 'red line' agreement. The missile crisis of 1981 had torn holes in the agreement, but in Asad's mind at least Habib's 'understanding' had established a new balance, somewhat more in his favour. Bolstered by his treaty with Moscow and his alliance with Iran, and by the final defeat of the Muslim Brothers at Hama in February 1982, he had recovered from the abysmal depths and was ready to stand up for himself: in April and May he had attempted to challenge Israel's air supremacy and had lost four MiGs in the process. But he was not ready for a full-scale fight and his deployments in Lebanon were modest and defensive.

His Achilles' heel was his relationship with 'Arafat, marked since their violent clash in 1976 by personal animosity and mutual mistrust despite a surface display of solidarity. The heart of the matter was, as it had been since the 1960s, that 'Arafat wanted freedom to make his own decisions while Asad saw this freedom as a threat to Syria's security. Asad resented the recognition 'Arafat had won in Europe,

which made him still more difficult to control, and the ties he had established with Saudi Arabia, not least during Habib's negotiations. Before Israel's invasion Syria and the PLO had held some talks but these fell far short of defence co-ordination, and Damascus was not consulted when, on 4 June, the Palestinians opened up against Galilee, falling into Begin's trap. Once again 'Arafat had presented Asad with a *fait accompli*. When therefore Israel's divisions poured across the frontier, the questions uppermost in Asad's mind were: How far are they coming? Will they attack me?

Israel was at pains to reassure him. On 5 June it asked the United States to tell Asad that his units in Lebanon would not be attacked unless they attacked first,[23] and on the 6th Begin wrote a letter to President Reagan promising not to expand the war to the Syrians. On the 7th Begin asked Philip Habib to go to Damascus with the same message. On the 8th Chief of Staff Eitan declared, 'We are making every effort to avoid confrontation with the Syrians. Our business in Lebanon is with the terrorists.' That same day Begin made an emotional personal appeal to Asad from the Knesset:[24]

> We do not want a war with Syria. From this podium, I call on President Asad to instruct the Syrian army not to attack Israeli soldiers, in which case they will not be harmed at all. In fact, we do not want to harm anybody, we only want one thing: that our settlements in the Galilee should not be attacked . . . If we push the line back forty kilometres from our northern border, our job would be completed and all fighting would stop. I make this call on the Syrian president because he knows how to fulfil an agreement.

These assurances and appeals were a ruse intended to lull Asad into a sense of false security, and to silence the criticisms of the United States and of those Israeli cabinet colleagues not privy to the real war aims. Operational plans were ready to deal with the Syrian garrison in Lebanon. On 7 June Syrian radars at Rayak airfield and at Damur were attacked; and even while Begin was speaking formidable task forces were moving to outflank Syrian defences. An armoured and infantry battle group of elite troops was pushing into the Shuf mountains to envelop Syrian positions at Jizzin before heading north, while further east 35,000 men and 800 tanks of the Biqa' Forces Group (BFG) commanded by Major-General Avigdor Ben-Gal (who had checked the Syrian assault on the Golan in 1973) had the mission to seize the Biqa' valley and advance on the Beirut-Damascus road, Syria's umbilical cord to Lebanon. Dealing with the Palestinians alone did not require

the deployment of seven mechanized and tank divisions as well as several independent brigades and other specialized units.

Tactically the Israeli General Staff wished to keep Syria out of the battle for the first seventy-two hours while the PLO was smashed, but the routing of the Palestinians was simply the prelude to action against Syria. Whatever they told the cabinet, Begin, Sharon and Eitan were agreed that the aim of the invasion went beyond destroying the PLO to destroying Syria's ability to subvert Israeli intentions regarding both Lebanon and Greater Israel. Whoever willed the ends also willed the means. Hence there was some justification in Sharon's later indignant rebuttals of the charge that he alone was responsible for the Lebanon War.[25] However far-fetched and personal his own strategic visions, the campaign against Syria could not rightly be attributed solely to him but flowed directly from Begin's Greater Israel ambitions.

Sharon's brief was to remove Syria from Lebanon. Could this be accomplished without the military action against Asad which Begin had pledged to avoid and which the United States and much of the Israeli government opposed? Having to conceal his true intentions was undoubtedly inhibiting. Sharon may have thought that a show of force or something short of a major conflict would do the job. At any rate, he fielded enough troops and in threatening enough deployments to impale Asad on the horns of a dilemma: either fight and be defeated or scuttle home and be humiliated. Either way Syria's presence in Lebanon would be ended and Asad's rule put at risk. Throughout the campaign Asad's difficult task was to dodge both options: to avoid either being trapped into a decisive battle or being evicted. This phase of the war was therefore a battle of wits between Asad and Sharon.

For the first two days, 6 and 7 June, it was still possible for Asad to believe that he was not the prime target and, in spite of the provocative movements of Israeli forces, he took great care not to be sucked in. As he later admitted, his first thought was that the Israelis would attack up the coast towards Sidon leaving his central and eastern sectors alone.[26] But by the 8th he could not escape the conclusion, confirmed by Deputy Chief of Staff General 'Ali 'Aslan whom he sent on a reconnaissance, that he was in imminent danger. Israel had overrun 'Fatahland' and was shelling PLO fighters who had fled to Syrian-held territory; Syria's forward defences at Jizzin were being attacked from three directions; and, most ominous of all, an Israeli armoured force racing north had that day reached a village just ten kilometres south of the Beirut-Damascus highway. Syrian troops in Beirut risked being cut off and units in the Biqa' faced encirclement. Swallowing part of Sharon's bait, Asad brought in some reinforcements from the Golan and added three SAM batteries to the sixteen already in the Biqa'.

The stage was set for the critical day, 9 June, in the Syrian-Israeli confrontation. Israel's assault on that day was both political and military. Begin asked Philip Habib – whom Reagan had despatched hurriedly to the area 'to cool things down'[27] – to carry a message to Asad which was in effect an ultimatum: Israel would not attack Syrian troops, but Asad must remove his SAMs from Lebanon and pull back all Palestinian units forty kilometres from Israel's border – impossibly humiliating terms. Habib put them to Foreign Minister Khaddam on the morning of the 9th, but in the early afternoon while he was waiting to see Asad, Syria's entire SAM network in the Biqa' was attacked and destroyed. Habib's mission had itself been a feint.

The Syrians had some minutes' warning of the attack when their radars observed large Israeli air formations gathering to the west, but almost immediately Israeli electronic countermeasures put the radars out of action. The SAM sites then came under intense attack from air-to-ground and ground-to-ground missiles in co-ordination with long-range artillery. Pilotless drones relayed the damage done, whereupon waves of Phantoms, Skyhawks and Kfirs, escorted by F-15 Eagles and F-16 Falcons, directed by Hawkeye command-and-control aircraft, came in to finish the job with high explosives and fragmentation bombs.[28] Further Israeli air strikes against Syrian SAMs in Lebanon were to follow in July and August. In seven raids the IAF destroyed some twenty-nine SAM batteries and damaged four more.

Asad was utterly outmatched in the air. His Soviet aircraft could not rival the F-15s and F-16s, not to mention their air-to-air missiles, nor did he have the benefit of Soviet early-warning or electronic warfare aircraft to match Israel's Hawkeyes and Boeing 707s. But on 9 June he knew that, whatever the cost, he had to break the Israeli forward momentum if his position in Lebanon was not to collapse like a pack of cards. Syrian interceptors were sent up with the desperate mission of stopping the Israeli raiders. The resulting air battles that afternoon between some 70 Syrian and 100 Israeli supersonic jets were the biggest of contemporary warfare.

Twenty-nine Syrian MiGs were shot down for the loss of not one Israeli plane. An Israeli pilot who fought in the battle reported that the Syrian pilots 'knew they stood no chance against us, yet kept coming in and coming in as if asking to be shot down. They showed such remarkable dedication and courage, and I have nothing but respect and admiration for them.'[29] Commenting on the Biqa' valley combat, a senior Israeli air force officer (widely believed to be the IAF commanding general, David Ivri) later remarked: 'Syrian aircraft were

fighting from a disadvantage, having to respond to the Israeli threat wherever and whenever it materialized, within a general strategic and tactical situation not in Syria's favour.'[30] In spite of crippling losses on the 9th, the Syrian air force was again massively in battle on the 10th, losing another thirty-five planes. Syria's defence minister later conceded that the 'honourable results' achieved involved heavy sacrifices.[31] Syrian pilots had been defeated by a combination of skill, years of rehearsal and the most sophisticated weapons, electronics and command-and-control systems in the American and Israeli armouries. An Egyptian source added a footnote: in 1981 Egypt secretly delivered to the United States a complete SAM-6 battery, giving American and Israeli technicians the chance to devise ways of jamming its three components, the missiles, the radar, and the command unit.[32]

The Biqa' missile complex was the most prestigious symbol of Syria's presence in Lebanon and of Asad's determination to hold Begin in check. In attacking it, Begin settled a political score, but at the same time, having won total air supremacy and stripped the Syrians naked, he was able to unleash his ground forces in eight columns up the Biqa' valley and its flanking mountain ranges, threatening and enveloping the main Syrian defence line from Lake Qar'un to Rashaya. There was no further Israeli pretence of avoiding combat with the Syrians nor room for doubt in Asad's mind that Israel aimed to destroy him. Now the question for him was: Would Sharon's armies surge forward to the Beirut-Damascus road, cutting off Syrian forces in Beirut and the mountains, or would they turn east and threaten Damascus itself?

Just as he had had to check Israel's air onslaught even at the cost of scores of planes and pilots, so with vital security interests at stake Asad now had to stand and fight. The ground battles of those days were the Syrian army's finest hour. Outnumbered and without air cover, it managed to hold up the Israeli advance and establish new defensive positions. In four days of all-out battle, often using small groups of tanks, anti-tank teams and commando units, it fought its way back in good order, making Israel pay for every metre it won in numerous ambushes and robbing the Israeli high command of the quick, surgical success it had hoped for. On 10 June the second Syrian armoured division, equipped with newly-arrived T-72s, fought a battle with an Israeli armoured brigade in the Rashaya area, pushing the Israelis back several kilometres, destroying thirty-three tanks and capturing some American-built M-60 tanks intact.[33] One was taken to Damascus and promptly flown to Moscow. Among many engagements two were critical. On the central front a single Syrian brigade of tanks and commandos checked the Israelis at the village of 'Ayn Zahalta for

more than two days, 8–10 June, preventing them from breaking through to the Beirut-Damascus road, and on the Biqa' front on 10–11 June, at the village of Sultan Ya'qub, Syria's First Tank Division stopped another Israeli thrust from reaching the crucial highway as it snaked its way towards the Syrian border.

Double dealing on the ceasefire

On 11 June 1982 a first ceasefire was negotiated, giving Asad a breathing space. Since the destruction of Syrian missiles on the 9th, international and essentially American pressure had been building up to halt Israel's invasion. At that moment of acute vulnerability, Asad flew secretly to Moscow[34] with an urgent appeal for Soviet protection, prompting Brezhnev to contact Reagan on the hotline. The prospect of superpower involvement rang an alarm bell in Washington. It was on this visit that, because Brezhnev was ailing, Asad had a long meeting with Yuri Andropov, then head of the KGB, who to Asad's relief displayed a detailed understanding of Middle East affairs. The meeting laid the groundwork for the Soviet Union's massive resupply of Syria after the war. Israeli pressure was again to result in an upgrading of Syrian military capability.

Israel's real war aims were now becoming clearer to the world at large and Begin's pledge to go no further than forty kilometres into Lebanon and not to attack the Syrians was seen to be a deception. Secretary Haig still argued that benefits could flow from the campaign, but in the White House fears were growing about where Begin's adventurism might lead. The United States had already voted in the Security Council for Resolution 508 of 5 June which called for an immediate halt to all military activity on either side of the Israeli-Lebanese border, and for Resolution 509 of 6 June which demanded an immediate and unconditional Israeli withdrawal. Time was running out for the Israeli hawks, but reining them in was not to prove easy.

Once again the ceasefire was the work of Philip Habib. After meeting Asad on the evening of the 9 June, he reported to Washington that the Syrian leader was ready to stop fighting provided Israel started to pull back at once and committed itself to withdrawing altogether. Reagan responded with an urgent personal message to both Asad and Begin – delivered at 2 a.m. on the 10th by Habib in Damascus and Ambassador Lewis in Jerusalem – in which he appealed for a ceasefire to begin at 6 o'clock that morning. This suited Asad provided his conditions were met, but Begin's aims were far from being achieved,

and Sharon and the generals were clamouring for more time. To delay progress on the ceasefire Begin turned for help to Haig, telephoning him in the early hours to invite him to come immediately to the area on the argument that only high-level US intervention could bring about a settlement. After boasting of the IAF's exploits against the Syrian air force the previous day, Begin laid down Israel's ceasefire terms: all Palestinians would have to leave the forty-kilometre zone, Syrian reinforcements in the Biqa' would have to withdraw, but Israel itself would not budge until security arrangements for its northern border had been agreed. Several hours were lost – or gained from the Israeli point of view – while Haig canvassed for support in Washington for his trip, but in the end Reagan vetoed it. Meanwhile, Israel pressed onward.

In Damascus Habib was in a quandary: Reagan's National Security Adviser, William Clark, signalled him to assure Asad of the president's firm support for an Israeli withdrawal, but Haig simultaneously instructed him to hold his hand and give the Israelis time.[35] Habib, a presidential envoy, chose to obey Clark. Late on 10 June he saw Asad for the second time that day, and passed on Reagan's assurance. He had no means of knowing that a few hours earlier Haig had persuaded Reagan not to send Begin a harsh message drafted by Clark insisting on an unconditional Israeli withdrawal.[36] So Habib had been undercut at home. He had given Asad assurances for which there was little commitment in Washington.

On the strength of Habib's guarantees, Asad agreed to pull back his own troops and to move the PLO fighters northwards. He also approved Habib's proposed timing for a ceasefire. As for the security arrangements in South Lebanon which Begin demanded, Asad made no demur except to say that these could not be part of a ceasefire agreement but would have to be discussed with the Lebanese government.

'Is there anything further you require from us or the Palestinians?' he asked Habib. 'No, nothing at all', Habib answered to Asad's satisfaction.[37]

One way or another, on the night of 10–11 June the Israelis learned of the Asad-Habib understanding. (They may have monitored Habib talking to Washington by satellite. The Damascus embassy communications facility had broken down and he was forced to fall back on voice transmission, not totally secure against eavesdroppers.)[38] On learning what had transpired in Damascus, the Israelis' dilemma was acute: to fall in with the terms Asad had unexpectedly agreed would have meant an immediate ceasefire and the gutting of their grandiose

plans. Their way out was to pre-empt Habib – and the American pledges he had given Asad – by declaring a unilateral ceasefire of their own unencumbered by conditions or promises to anyone. The Israeli announcement was broadcast at 8.45 GMT on the morning of 11 June, the ceasefire to come into effect at 10.00 GMT. As Habib had left Damascus for Jerusalem early that morning, Asad, on hearing the news, took it to mean that Israel had agreed to the same terms as he had, underwritten by the United States. Accordingly at 10.10 GMT he broadcast his own acceptance of the ceasefire.

The awakening for Asad – and for Habib – was brutal. As Habib recalled:[39]

> It soon became apparent that Israel's ceasefire didn't mean a thing. Sharon's forces weren't stopping but were moving up fast in the Shuf and were surrounding Beirut. I went to Israel to find out what the hell was going on. When I asked the meaning of this rolling ceasefire, I got bland looks.
>
> Casuistically Begin said, 'Ronald Reagan's message said nothing about a ceasefire in place.'
>
> 'Is this your interpretation?' I stormed at him. 'You cease fire, he ceases fire; you move forward, he shoots, and he has broken the ceasefire! You've invented a new sort of ceasefire. I'll have to get the military attaché to write it up for the record!'

Begin still intended to take control of Beirut to put his man, Bashir Jumayil, in power, so, ignoring the ceasefire, Israeli troops supported by air, sea and artillery bombardments stormed Syrian and Palestinian positions on the outskirts of Beirut and the hills overlooking the capital. The unhappy Habib and a divided Washington were unable to check them. By 13 June Israeli paratroops had linked up with Bashir Jumayil's militiamen in a cordon around West Beirut, bottling up some 14,000 Syrian and PLO troops in an enclave twenty-five kilometres square. A week later, on 22 June, Israel again boldly broke the ceasefire with a full-scale assault on Syrian units defending the Beirut-Damascus highway east of the city. In three days of fierce fighting the Syrians were driven fifteen kilometres back up the road, depriving Asad of any leverage over the battle for the capital. On the evening of the 25th yet another ceasefire was negotiated.

No doubt Asad was saved from a larger-scale defeat in the Biqa' and on the approaches to Damascus by the two ceasefires of 11 and 25 June. Sharon was later to complain that he was denied victory by American intervention. But Sharon's own deceptions, differences of

focus between him and Begin, and the inhibitions of other members of the government all contributed to his difficulties. There was no consensus in the Israeli cabinet or in the country for a war against Syria to change the regional political map. Had Sharon been able to admit that Syria was his prime target, he could have shaped a more effective strategy, perhaps leapfrogging the PLO at the start to hit Syrian forces first. But Begin was obsessed with the PLO and saw its destruction as the primary objective. So Sharon had to act by stealth, manoeuvring to draw Asad's fire but unable to get in a knockout blow. Sidestepping the trap and keeping the bulk of his forces intact at home, Asad denied Sharon the opportunity to use Israel's full power against him. Sharon did not expel him from Lebanon and so long as he remained there Israel's victory was not sealed. To this extent Asad won the battle of wits.

Yet for several grim weeks Asad was reduced to being little more than a spectator while 'Arafat, besieged in West Beirut, became the focus of world attention. For a man like Asad, who had devoted his entire career to making Syria a central player in the Middle East drama, it was profoundly embarrassing and humiliating to be forced to sit on the sidelines as Israel assaulted an Arab capital a stone's throw away. In accepting the 11 June ceasefire Asad had not consulted the Palestinians and was now accused of abandoning them. In spite of all the sacrifices of the Syrian army and air force, he faced the wounding charge that he had not fought. 'Arafat's accusations on this score were something Asad could never forgive. Driven back from the environs of Beirut, he could do nothing to relieve the agony of its inhabitants or even to rescue his own men cut off in the city. Brigadier-General Muhammad Halal, an October War veteran who commanded the Syrian brigade in Beirut, put up a stout defence. Between bombardments the Israelis dropped leaflets over his positions saying: 'General Halal, we know you are there. Run for your life.' But his orders from Damascus were to fight to the last man.

The siege of Beirut

Curiously, having reached Beirut, Sharon was uncertain what to do next and seemed to flounder in a political and moral vacuum. Begin and Sharon had all along planned to pursue the PLO to the bitter end, to Beirut if need be, but under their deal with Bashir Jumayil it was to be his task not theirs to enter the capital and finish off the 'terrorists'. However, when the Israelis asked him to redeem his promise he backed

away hoping the Israelis themselves would do the dirty work. Bashir's hesitations at this critical moment shook the whole basis of the Maronite-Israeli alliance on which Begin's postwar hopes for Lebanon rested.

Sharon had the troops to do the job himself and by now had virtually thrown off any restraint on him from the Israeli cabinet, but the idea of using the IDF to 'clean out' Beirut's shanty-towns alarmed the growing numbers of critics both in Israel and abroad and even some of his field commanders. Fear of further Israeli casualties was an inhibiting factor. Sharon had so far run the war much as he pleased, but even for him the entry of an Arab capital was a daunting threshold to cross. Had he stormed the city at once in hot pursuit of the fleeing PLO, he might have got away with it: his failure to do so meant that the physical annihilation of the PLO, a major Israeli objective of the war, was fudged.

Even hard-liners like Sharon were by now acutely aware of the erosion of their support in Washington. On a visit there on 21 June Begin had faced sharp questioning from President Reagan and Secretary of Defense Weinberger, deriving comfort only from Haig's reluctance to join in. But on 25 June came the news that Haig had been sacked: Israel had lost its foremost champion in the Administration. It was not only or even primarily Israel's war which cost Haig his job and brought George Shultz in to replace him. Haig had clashed repeatedly with White House advisers on other issues such as relations with Europe and economic sanctions against Moscow, earning him a reputation as a poor team player. But the Lebanese War in which he had colluded and his argument (modelled on Kissinger's in 1973) that it opened up opportunities for peace were the last straw. Reagan agreed on the need to evict the PLO from Lebanon but he wanted Lebanon to be freed from both Syria and Israel and restored to being a buffer between them. He did not support Begin's ambition to bring Lebanon under Israel's wing as a Maronite-dominated state.[40]

Having to take account of these new realities, Begin and Sharon reluctantly fell in with Reagan's suggestion to let Philip Habib try his hand at getting the PLO out of Beirut by negotiation. Sharon had no taste for such mealy-mouthed methods believing that 'Arafat would yield only to force, and throughout Habib's summer-long mission he relentlessly pounded the city's teeming southern suburbs where the PLO and Syrian forces had gone to ground. He blockaded them, cutting off water, food and electricity. Time and again, a dozen times in all, Habib had to patch up the ceasefire breached by Sharon, beg like a supplicant for flour and other supplies, and soothe despairing

Lebanese politicians. Sharon, the arrogant victor, could not be restrained. The violence he unleashed on West Beirut in his nine-week siege was intended to bring home to 'Arafat and his fighters as well as to the Lebanese population around them that their options were strictly limited.

The Israeli attacks on the city came roughly in three successive waves: an artillery barrage from 13 to 25 June; air raids from 5 to 12 July; and finally from 22 July to 12 August even more lethal bombardments from air, land and sea. The first two waves seemed designed to bring about an unconditional PLO surrender, and when this failed the third was meant to add Israeli menace to Habib's negotiations for a Palestinian exodus.[41] Israel used concussion bombs to bring down whole buildings as well as phosphorus shells and high explosives and, in at least sixteen locations in West Beirut, American-made cluster bombs.[42] In the brief campaign from 5 June to the end of August some 17,000 to 19,000 Lebanese and Palestinians were killed and another 30,000 to 40,000 wounded.[43]

Sharon's gratuitous cruelty – as in the eleven-hour saturation bombardment of 12 August, *after* the PLO had agreed to go – pointed to his hankering for more radical solutions. What he and Bashir Jumayil had envisaged was not the orderly retreat of PLO combatants, heads held high after a 'heroic stand', but rather the root-and-branch clearing out of the Palestinian presence, the razing of the camps, and the forced deportation of two or three hundred thousand people. Whenever Habib referred to 'PLO combatants', Sharon bellowed his correction: 'PLO terrorists and murderers!' Begin's fear was that the PLO would extract political promises, even recognition, from the United States.

While Habib was struggling to untangle the Beirut mess, Sharon was continuing to press Bashir Jumayyil to join him in a 'cleansing operation'. In Jerusalem on 23 June, Begin had scolded him like an angry schoolmaster for not 'liberating' Beirut. Bashir often came to Habib for advice, developing a dependence on the older, wiser man whom he sometimes addressed as *'Ammo* (uncle). One night late in July he arrived alone at the American ambassador's residence where Habib was staying.

'I'm coming under great pressure. Sharon wants me to clean out the West Beirut camps. He wants me to go in from the east while he comes up from the south. What should I do, *'Ammo?*'

'Well, what do you think you should do?'

'There'd be a lot of killing. It would be tough and I'd lose a lot of men. But how can I resist Sharon?'

'You know, Bashir, that I'm negotiating the withdrawal of the Palestinians. You also know you want to be president one day. If you do what Sharon asks it will damn you. It will make it hard for you to become president of all the Lebanese, Muslims as well as Christians. Don't do it, Bashir. Say no.'[44]

A bully boy and gang leader in his youth, Bashir matured as the presidential election loomed closer into a prudent politician. But while he continued to resist Sharon's pressure, he was still Israel's man. When, aged thirty-four, he was elected president of Lebanon by a simple majority of parliamentary deputies on 23 August 1982 to take office a month later, he owed his position to Israeli guns. However, after the election (which took place in an army barracks near Beirut), and after paying a courtesy call on outgoing President Ilyas Sarkis, he drove up to the American residence to thank Habib, who he knew had softened Muslim opposition to him and saved him from total dependence on Israel.

Habib had by this time also managed to solve the problem of the besieged Palestinians and Syrians. An evacuation plan was ironed out on 19 August in contacts with Israel, 'Arafat, Asad and other Arab leaders. Sharon, the blunt Israeli soldier-patriot, the ultra-nationalist, the centurion of Unit 101, appeared to have won the day, for by 1 September the PLO combatants and the Syrians – over 14,000 people, including some 10,800 Palestinian fighters, 664 Palestinian women and children and 3,600 Syrian troops – had gone. Supervised by a Multinational Force of Americans, French and Italians, the PLO guerrillas embarked by sea while the Syrians and allied PLA units trundled east along the Beirut-Damascus highway. Habib had obtained an assurance from the Israelis that they would let them go without harassment and would keep out of sight while the withdrawal took place. But the Israelis did not stick to the agreement. As he later recalled, 'They could not resist showing they had won. They hoisted Israeli flags along the road and lined it with triumphant Israeli generals.'[45] From a nearby rooftop Bashir Jumayil counted the trucks carrying the Syrians and Palestinians out of his capital.

Refuge for the evacuees

As the drama unfolded, Asad, grimly watching Beirut slip from his grip, struggled to rescue something from the wreckage. He had failed to prevent Bashir Jumayil's election, his unsuccessful efforts to secure a boycott of the vote, to intimidate deputies or put together an anti-

Bashir alliance only serving to highlight the decline of his influence. He knew that Israeli control of Beirut even through a client would pose a threat to him as grave as Sharon's bid to throw him out of the Biqa'. It would be only a matter of time before an Israeli-dominated president brought pressure on him to withdraw, thereby exposing his flank to Israel and undercutting his regional position.

To head off this dread prospect, the permanent bane of his life, Asad had tried to stall Habib's evacuation plan. He had wanted the PLO and indeed his own men to call Sharon's bluff and force him either to come in and get them or to climb down. He had sent passionate appeals to his beleaguered units to keep fighting:[46]

> Beloved ones, I am living with you day and night . . . Beirut's Arabism is a trust in your hands . . . I ask you to remain steadfast: martyrdom or victory!

In the Biqa' he allowed Palestinian raiding parties through the Syrian lines to harass the Israelis, but he had no direct influence over 'Arafat in Beirut. His only lever lay in refusing to co-operate with Habib's increasingly frantic pleas to the Arab states to provide a home for the Palestinians evacuated from the city. Syria would take none, he declared. Throughout the summer Washington put diplomatic pressure on him, while Israel tried to force his hand on 22 July by a surprise bombardment of his entire Biqa' front – allegedly to punish him for guerrilla infiltrations. But when Habib called on him in Damascus the next day, he was adamant in his refusal to co-operate, angry at the spectre of an Israeli proxy ruling in Beirut.

He had a score to settle with the American envoy, as this was Asad's first meeting with Habib since the misunderstandings over the 11 June ceasefire. What had gone wrong, he wanted to know. Why had Habib's assurances of an Israeli withdrawal, given with the authority of an American president, not been honoured?

'It was beyond my powers, Mr President', Habib replied with some embarrassment.

'Is the word of the United States not to be trusted?' Asad asked. 'What then is the meaning of any international agreement?'

According to Asad's aides Habib had little say. 'Mr President, we are living in very bad times', he replied lamely.[47]

By 10 August, it was clear to Asad that, whether he liked it or not, the Palestinians would soon be forced out of Beirut. Intense Israeli military pressure on 'Arafat was compounded by moral pressure from Lebanese leaders to spare the civilian population further hardship.

Asad also suspected that 'Arafat hoped to win future concessions from the United States (an idea Habib may have put into 'Arafat's head through the Lebanese Sunni leader Sa'ib Salam) if he left Lebanon on American terms. Asad thought any such expectations hopelessly gullible but he nevertheless had to consider their likely effect on 'Arafat. So when it seemed that 'Arafat would hold out no longer, he changed his mind and agreed to give refuge in Syria to the bulk of the Beirut evacuees. No doubt he hoped to regain some control over 'Arafat's men who blamed Asad for abandoning them and who now in adversity seemed more independent than ever.

Assassination of Bashir

With Bashir Jumayil elected to the presidency of Lebanon and the Syrians and PLO out of Beirut, Israel began to claim the political rewards of its campaign. Begin, Sharon, Shamir, deputy premier David Levi and others made no bones of their expectation that, freed from Syrian toils, Lebanon would sign a peace treaty with them. Any Syrian obstruction to this programme, Shamir declared, would be 'a brutal, insolent threat to peace'.[48] Bashir himself called for the withdrawal of foreign armies – Syrian, Israeli and Palestinian – committing in Syrian eyes the heinous crime of putting Syria on the same footing as Israel. The late summer of 1982 was a very low point in Asad's fortunes: regionally and domestically his whole position was at risk.

An event then occurred which was greatly to his advantage. On 14 September an immense explosion at the local headquarters of the Phalanges party in East Beirut killed Bashir Jumayil and some thirty of his associates. Shortly afterwards the man who planted the bomb, Habib Tanyus Shartuni, was arrested by the Lebanese Forces. His sister who lived in an apartment just above the Phalanges headquarters inadvertently gave him away by blurting out in a hysterical outburst that he had telephoned a warning to her to leave the building minutes before the explosion. Shartuni was identified as a clandestine member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party ideologically committed to Damascus and one of Asad's staunchest allies in resisting Israel's ambitions. A branch of Syrian intelligence was rumoured to have assisted Shartuni in placing the bomb, although the link could not be proved. Another man, Nabil 'Alam, also suspected of involvement, took refuge in Syria.[49] Shartuni's act might best be understood in the context of his party's view of Syro-Lebanese relations, as later expounded by the SSNP leader In'am Ra'd:[50]

> We had no hope of resisting the Israelis on the basis of Lebanese patriotism divorced from the Syrian axis. I happen to be Lebanese but ideologically I consider myself Syrian. Without Syrian support Lebanon would have been lost.

The killing of Bashir precipitated the notorious revenge massacres of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps organized with Israeli collusion by Bashir's intelligence chief Elie Hubayka. Within hours of Bashir's death and in breach of Habib's agreement, Sharon on 15 September had ordered the IDF into West Beirut, and by the morning of the 16th it was totally in Israeli hands. No doubt he saw an opportunity to get the Phalanges, anxious to avenge their leader, to do what Bashir had long resisted – that is, clean out the Palestinians from West Beirut. To justify some such action he publicly alleged that 'Arafat had left behind 2,000 PLO fighters lurking under cover in Sabra and Shatila. At 6 p.m. on 16 September Major-General Amir Drori, head of Israel's Northern Command, authorized Hubayka's security force to enter the camps to search for them. The carnage of Palestinian civilians started at once, went on all that night, continued all the next day and night, and did not end until 8 a.m. on 18 September. About a thousand men, women and children were slaughtered. Throughout these forty hours Israeli troops cordoned off the camps, firing flares at night to provide illumination for the Phalangist killers inside. Habib, who by evacuating the Palestinian fighters had left their dependants defenceless, was not the only one to be sickened:[51]

> Sharon was a killer, obsessed by hatred of Palestinians. I had given 'Arafat an undertaking that his people would not be harmed, but this was totally disregarded by Sharon whose word was worth nothing.

Lebanon was traumatized by Bashir's death and by its savage aftermath. Although everyone knew he had been Israel's man, it was beginning to be realized that he had sought to distance himself from the Israelis, and it was widely supposed that he might have made a better president than his brutal beginnings suggested. Insiders knew, for instance, that at a meeting with Begin at the border town of Nahariya on 1 September he had resisted peremptory demands for immediate peace talks. It was with something like the relief of a drowning man grasping for a raft that on 21 September the Lebanese welcomed the election as president of Bashir's elder brother, Amin. Amin had no Mossad or CIA links and, if anything, had somewhat

disapproved of Bashir's ties, but as a Jumayil and a Phalangist he represented continuity. He was the best the Israelis could hope for in the circumstances.

Begin was cast down by Bashir's death and tarnished by the Sabra and Shatila massacres. In the face of the international outcry, he disclaimed Israeli responsibility with prickly defensiveness: '*Goyim* kill *goyim*, and they immediately come to hang the Jews'. Unconvinced, some 400,000 Israelis took to the streets on 25 September to demand an inquiry in the largest protest demonstration the country had known. The Multinational Force, which had left Lebanon on the heels of the departing PLO, now returned, but without plan or mandate save for a guilty consciousness that, in the anarchy of Lebanon riven by communal hatreds, innocent civilians needed protection. However, the European powers and the United States whose forces constituted the MNF refused to land their troops before the Israeli army had left, and by 29 September Sharon withdrew his men from the city he had fought so hard to seize.

Begin's Lebanon War carried to extravagant lengths an interventionist trend in Israeli politics which from the days of Ben Gurion's premiership aimed at hegemony over the Arabs by military means. But the war and its mishaps demonstrated the inherent limits to the ability of a small country, however wilful and well armed, to force its writ on a whole region. Nevertheless, the more elusive the prize, the more stubborn its pursuit. Asad's duel with Begin was not yet over.

23

The Defeat of George Shultz

The Lebanon was Asad's bitterest war. Rarely had he felt more isolated or unfairly maligned than in the autumn of 1982. Twelve years of risk and effort had led to this: Israeli armies, a mere twenty-eight kilometres from his capital, were imposing a 'new order' on Lebanon which left his security and regional standing in tatters. After the military defeat he had suffered, his call for steadfastness against Israel so often used to upbraid others seemed hollow and his vaunted quest for parity more unrealistic than ever.

He had known adversity in battle before, but not as painfully. In 1967 the disaster was shared by all the Arabs; in 1973, disappointing though the outcome was, he had chosen the place and the time to wage war and was buoyed up by a tide of Arab pride and solidarity. But in 1982 war was forced upon him and he fought alone: Israel was able to put all its energies into a one-front campaign. His losses had been heavy: about 1,200 men dead, 3,000 wounded and 296 taken prisoner; over 300 tanks, 140 armoured personnel carriers, and 80 artillery pieces destroyed. His SAM missile batteries had been smashed and 76 aircraft and six helicopters shot down with, gravest of all, the loss of 60 pilots.[1] In contrast, Israel admitted to losing only one Skyhawk brought down by a Palestinian missile on the first day of the war, and a reconnaissance Phantom downed by a Syrian missile on 11 July. It was little comfort to him that US official estimates put the IAF's losses somewhat higher – 'probably in the region of 11–12 aircraft and three helicopters'.[2] The only thing to cheer him was that by September 1982 the IDF had suffered some 350 men dead and 2,100 wounded, and he knew how sensitive Israel was to casualties.

Much of Asad's unhappiness came from the Arab environment. The Palestinians, his so-called allies, could no more help him than he could help them, while the rest of the Arab world, powerless before the Israeli blitzkrieg, offered him nothing but abuse. 'Gloating and

conspiring' as he described them,[3] his Arab enemies sought to exploit his difficulties. Mubarak of Egypt accused him of a secret deal with Begin to divide Lebanon between them, and denied that there had ever been an air battle over the Biqa'; Saddam Husayn of Iraq charged that he was in treacherous collusion with Israel; Husayn of Jordan indicted him for 'liquidating the Palestine cause'. Even his friend Qadhafi of Libya criticized his acceptance of a ceasefire. Only his new Iranian allies extended a friendly hand. Although hard-pressed in their own war against Iraq, they sent 500 volunteers to fight alongside his troops in the Biqa'.

Asad was equally disillusioned with the superpowers. Moscow, with which he had so recently signed a Treaty of Friendship, remained extraordinarily passive throughout the conflict. In spite of his secret wartime visit to Moscow, it was evident that Brezhnev, in his last feeble months of life and distracted by the crises in Afghanistan and Poland, was as anxious as ever to avoid a superpower confrontation. But Asad's deepest grievance was against the United States. Haig's tolerance of the Israeli invasion had blatantly disregarded Syria's security interests, and once Syria had been defeated and the Soviet Union had failed to intervene on its behalf, Washington seemed to write Asad off. It saw no need to make amends to him for Israel's ceasefire violations which undermined Habib's presidential pledges. He was simply ignored. The United States backed the election of Bashir Jumayil whom Asad considered a traitor, and acted as broker in the expulsion of the Palestinian fighters. It was hard for him not to conclude that Washington fully supported Begin's bid to subjugate the Arabs. As for the 'Reagan Plan' of 1 September – the US blueprint for a regional settlement rushed out on the day the last PLO man left Beirut – it failed even to mention Syria or its occupied Golan Heights. By this time, Asad's resentment of the United States was curdling into something like hatred. He was a man to bear grudges, to brood over wrongs done to him, and above all not to be put upon. Even at this dismal time – with his air force crippled, Israel supreme, the Arabs inert and the United States unfriendly, to say the least – he would not admit defeat.

His first priorities were to encourage guerrilla harassment of Israel in Lebanon, while racing to rebuild Syria's own armed strength. He was not ready for an immediate confrontation. In preparing to subvert Israel's designs, he had to lie low and lull his opponents into believing he was finished.

Israel's fear of casualties was a chink in its armour which he could exploit. Hardly had Israeli troops withdrawn from Beirut at the end of

September than they became the targets of snipers, ambushes, booby-trapped cars, hand-grenades lobbed from passing vehicles, in a swelling campaign of irregular warfare. The casualties were not great but the impact of the steady bloodletting on Israeli opinion and IDF morale was considerable. The most spectacular incident was the blowing up of the IDF staff headquarters in Tyre on 11 November 1982 when sixty-seven Israelis died. No firm evidence linked Syria to these operations, but there is little doubt that Asad sent all the help he could to his friends and allies in the Lebanese resistance at this time.

The powerful security agencies which had grown up in Syria between 1977 and 1982 to wage war on the Muslim Brothers were now given new targets. In the struggle for Lebanon, Asad made use of every asset he had, among which were a good many seasoned fighters. The Palestinians evacuated from Beirut to Syria were installed in the Syrian-controlled Biqa' where they joined large numbers of their fellows who had escaped the advancing Israeli columns in the early days of the war. Now they were directed to guerrilla tasks across the Syrian lines. At the same time, inside occupied Lebanon Asad tightened his links with the fighting wings of the Lebanese Ba'th Party, the Lebanese Communist Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and of course his principal allies, the Shi'a. By devious means, money, weapons and supplies flowed in over the mountains from Damascus. None of these Lebanese resistance groups except the Ba'thists took direct orders from Damascus; each was fighting its own corner. But the common interest in opposing the Israeli occupation served to extend Asad's reach.

When the Israelis first invaded Lebanon many Shi'a in the south welcomed them as deliverers from the high-handed Palestinians, but the brutality of the invasion and the signs that the Israelis were preparing for a long stay exhausted their welcome. Then Israel's attempt to impose Maronite rule drove the Shi'a into outright opposition. They had tilted towards Syria in the early 1970s when Asad befriended their leader, the Imam Musa al-Sadr; now Asad's relations with Iran helped cement the tie. His need for proxies to harass Israel coincided with Iran's eagerness to export its revolutionary message. These overlapping interests served to transform the city of B'albak in the Biqa' into a politico-religious centre of ferment, where some 2,000 Iranians (who had transited Syria with Asad's agreement) were joined by a militant Lebanese faction, Amal al-Islami, several thousand strong under a breakaway Amal commander, Husayn al-Musawi. These Shi'a, whether Iranian or Arab, were imbued with a spirit of martyrdom and consumed with loathing for Israel and the United States. They made a speciality of suicide attacks. Zealous and fanatical, they were not fully controllable, but they were on Asad's side. In November 1982 they took over the town hall and principal barracks in B'albak. Asad's alliance with Iran which had attracted so much Arab criticism was now paying off where he needed it most – in the life-and-death struggle against Israel.

Such proxies and their terror tactics were useful, but they could be of little avail if Syria itself came under military attack. After the destruction of his missiles and much of his air force between June and August 1982, Asad urgently needed to recover a degree of deterrence. The Soviet Union alone could help, but the war had cast a chill on relations between Damascus and Moscow. For public consumption all was well, but behind the scenes the Syrians were angered by Soviet caution. They also blamed their defeat in the Biqa' air battles on the shortcomings of Soviet equipment, while the Russians charged the Syrians with incompetence. On 13 June, when General Yevgeny Yurasov, first deputy commander-in-chief of the Soviet Air Defence Forces, conducted an on-site inspection of the shattered missile batteries four days after their destruction, there was some acrimony between his team and the Syrian general staff. Relations did not improve in July, August and September, when the IAF with apparently effortless mastery knocked out another dozen newly installed SAMs. On 19 July Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, Chief of the Soviet General Staff, came in person to assess what by any standards was a major setback for Soviet weapons systems. The Soviet worry was that Israel's know-how in destroying the missiles would be shared with the United States. In these months of frosty argument, Soviet supplies to Syria were restricted to minimal replacements.

The war highlighted an inherent contradiction in the Syrian-Soviet relationship. Asad depended on Moscow for advanced weapons, but at the same time he insisted on full political autonomy: in 1976 he had intervened in Lebanon without consulting the Russians and indeed against their wishes; in 1980 he had massed troops to intimidate Jordan without informing the Russians beforehand; in 1981 he moved missiles into the Biqa', again without consultation, causing Soviet ambassador Vladimir Yukhin to hurry to Moscow and a Soviet deputy foreign minister to hurry to Damascus; and the war of 1982 broke out without co-ordination before the fighting. Whatever the 1980 Treaty of Friendship did for Asad's morale, it was far from being a strategic alliance.[4]

Nevertheless the two countries needed each other, that was a fact of life, and by the autumn of 1982 efforts were being made to patch

things up. It was to the advantage of both of them: Asad needed arms, while the Russians needed to restore the reputation of their high-performance weapons as well as their overall political position in the Arab world. To grab the Kremlin's attention, Asad argued that the United States was planning to use Israel and Lebanon as a springboard for further expansion, a thesis which seemed borne out by Reagan's decision in August 1982 to send US marines to Beirut. He knew it would be to his advantage if the Soviet authorities saw the Middle East as a decisive prize in East-West competition. The Kremlin seemed won over but was painfully slow in coming up with the goods. Relations were in this somewhat uneasy state when Leonid Brezhnev's death, announced on 11 November 1982, brought his long stagnant rule to an end. For Asad, who declared seven days' mourning in Syria, it could not have come at a more opportune moment.

Brezhnev's funeral in Moscow on 15 November gave him the chance to renew his acquaintance with Andropov and put his case for more and better weapons. To Asad's relief, Andropov agreed to inaugurate a new era in Syrian-Soviet military co-operation with a deepening of mutual commitment and a vast increase in the quantity and quality of arms deliveries. Defence Minister Tlas, who accompanied Asad to the Soviet Union for the funeral, recalled that it was Andropov himself who insisted that Syria must get the weapons it required, overruling reservations expressed by Soviet Defence Minister Ustinov and Foreign Minister Gromyko. When Ustinov claimed that advanced weapons could not be spared, Andropov said: 'Take them from Red Army stocks. I will not allow any power in the world to threaten Syria.'[5] Andropov was as good as his word: Asad did not have to pay further secret visits to the Soviet Union, as was widely rumoured, but merely sent delegations to negotiate detailed arms contracts. Thus Syria secured the immediate deterrent capability it needed, and this was only the first instalment of a major expansion and upgrading of its armed strength over the next four years. (The armed forces grew from 225,000 in 1982 to 400,000 in 1986, and the complement of armour from 3,200 to 4,400 tanks, of combat aircraft from 440 to 650, of artillery pieces from 2,600 to 4,000, and the air defence sites from 100 to 180, to cite only the main items.)[6]

Over the winter of 1982–3 the first fruits of the new understanding began to appear. A number of advanced weapons systems attracted keen foreign interest because this was the first time Moscow had sold them to a Third World country. The SS-21, a new generation surface-to-surface missile which entered Soviet service in 1982 and was then deployed, to NATO alarm, in Czechoslovakia, was supplied to Syria in

1983. Far more accurate and effective than the Scud already in Syria's armoury, it brought into range Israeli air bases and dockyards. A second innovation was the SSC-1, a long-range anti-ship missile which for the first time gave Syria a coastal defence capability. But the arrivals which in January 1983 caused the most excitement were two batteries of long-range, high-altitude SAM-5 missiles never before deployed outside the Warsaw Pact. They formed the backbone of an integrated air defence system which the Soviet Union now set about constructing, embracing many other types of SAMs, horizon-scanning radar, electronic jammers, and sophisticated command-and-control facilities.[7] Asad thus acquired the means to defend himself against Israeli air attack from the port of Latakia in the north to the Jordan border in the south. (A byproduct of the deal was that Syria had to cancel an intended purchase of three Boeing 757s for its civil airline and buy Tupolev 154s instead. It was a political decision taken reluctantly, but Asad could not afford to say no.)

The advanced weapons changed the Syrian-Soviet relationship in a number of important ways. For one thing, the SAM-5s and the surface-to-surface missiles were operated by Soviet crews. There had been some 2,500 Soviet 'advisers' in Syria in 1982, but by 1984–5 the number had more than doubled to allow for the manning of the new systems as well as the instruction of Syrians in the use of some other new weapons such as the MiG-23 Bis interceptor, the MiG-27 ground attack aircraft, and the T-74 tank, all of which made their first appearance in Syria after the Lebanon War. In addition, Moscow gave Syria a commitment to come to its aid if it were attacked by Israel – an immense boost for Asad and a vital element in his search for strategic balance. 'We have lifted one paw of the Soviet bear and put it down in Syria', Foreign Minister Khaddam boasted.

There was, however, another side to the coin. The Soviet Union wanted greater influence over its protégé, an instinct natural in a patron, so to secure the weapons and protection he needed Asad had to surrender a certain freedom of action. While he retained control over tactical and operational matters, he lost some control over ultimate strategy. His aspiration for parity with Israel had become a Soviet benefaction, to give or withhold. Moreover, with air defences and long-range missiles dependent on Soviet personnel, Syria could no longer consider starting hostilities as it had done in 1973; this too would have to be a Soviet decision. Asad was more constrained than before, but he was also a good deal safer.

These arrangements rested on agreed political foundations. The two allies were at one in seeking to deny Israel the achievement of its war

aims, reassert Syria's influence in Lebanon, and prevent the conclusion of an American-brokered Israel-Lebanon peace treaty, which both saw as opening the door to US-Israeli regional hegemony.

Soviet stiffening made Asad bolder. When in the spring of 1983 Israel protested about the SAM-5s, a battle of words blew up which seemed to threaten war. Khaddam complained to the Security Council about Israel's aggressive intentions. And when US Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger raised the alarm over Syrian missile deployment, Gromyko riposted with a warning that an Israeli attack could endanger world peace. But by this time the IDF's fatal casualties in Lebanon had topped the five hundred mark, and Israel had no stomach for further conflict. 'We have no intention of going to war against Syria over the new missiles or for any other reason', Israel's once bellicose Chief of Staff, General Eitan, protested.[8] But the Syrians were on their mettle. 'We do not fear war. We have enough strength to hit back harder to any blow we receive',[9] declared Dr Najah al-'Attar, Asad's forceful woman Minister of Culture who, with the illness of Information Minister Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad, was emerging as Asad's chief mouthpiece. Such verbal defiance signalled that Syria had begun to chip away at Israel's military advantage.

The Reagan plan

An enemy's mistakes can be as useful as one's own achievements. In climbing up from the abysmal depths of the Lebanon war, Asad was greatly helped by Israel's slowness to exploit its military victory. Had Israel imposed its 'order' on Lebanon in early September 1982 when it was at the height of its power, Asad could have done little about it. But nine long months elapsed before a Lebanese-Israeli agreement was concluded, by which time he was strong enough to contest it. It seemed as if the killing of Bashir Jumayil, the Palestinian massacres, Amin's election, and the forced withdrawal of Israeli troops from West Beirut had weakened Israel's resolve. Its hopes of a pliant Lebanese government ready to do its bidding were fast fading.

Difficulties with the United States were another constraint on Israel. The shock of war had disrupted the close relationship and aroused an impulse in Washington to reassert some control over its runaway ally. President Reagan had been affronted by Israel's cavalier dismissal of his pleas to spare Beirut, and the United States could not be wholly deaf to Arab protests nor be seen to collude in the smashing of an Arab capital. Differences of substance began to emerge between Washington

and Jerusalem. Whereas the Administration sympathized with Israel's security concerns, it never fully underwrote nor perhaps even understood Begin's wider objectives of safeguarding Greater Israel by controlling Lebanon and neutralizing Syria. The official American position was still that an independent Lebanon should be restored as a buffer between Syria and Israel, and that the West Bank and Gaza were occupied Arab territories from which at some stage Israel would have to withdraw, in part or in whole.

But independent American thinking on the Middle East had long since been trammelled by fear of the pro-Israeli lobby and by a cupboardful of secret pledges, understandings, and memoranda of agreement extracted by Israel from succeeding Administrations over many years. Whatever the official position, in practice American Middle East policy was characterized by inconsistency and muddle, not wholly surprisingly given the endemic feuds between rival departments of government, the enmeshment of the issues with domestic politics, and the way the Middle East rose and fell on Washington's agenda. A committed pro-Israeli like Kissinger, a liberal lawyer like Vance, an ambitious maverick like Haig inevitably pulled American policy in different directions. This was George Shultz's inheritance when he took over the State Department at the height of the war.

Shultz came to office with mildly pro-Arab views, attributed to his eight years as a senior executive of the giant Bechtel Corporation which did a good deal of construction and engineering business in the Arab world. He had studied economics at Princeton, served in the marines in the Second World War, returned to academia at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Chicago, before Nixon brought him into government in 1969 to serve in succession as Secretary of Labor, Director of the Office of Management and Budget and Secretary of the Treasury. After that came the highly paid front man's job at Bechtel. Now this big, bland, largely apolitical Republican without diplomatic experience was pitched into the Middle East quicksands at their most treacherous.

After the trauma of war the whole world, and the Arabs in particular, looked to the United States to give a lead on a broad Middle East settlement including a solution to the Palestine problem. There was also the more specific matter of sorting out relations between Lebanon and its formidable Israeli neighbour whose armies were still camped on its territory. In an effort to get on top of these problems Shultz asked the State Department for a briefing document on the fundamentals of American policy as they had been shaped by his predecessors, and one was compiled under the direction of Nicholas

Veliotes, assistant secretary for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs.

This paper was the basis for a speech delivered by President Reagan on 1 September 1982 which came to be known as the 'Reagan plan'. For all the interest the speech aroused, the underlying briefing document had not been intended as the foundation of a major US initiative nor was the president's political weight committed to it. Reagan's priorities at this time were essentially domestic, and insofar as he had foreign concerns they were to do with Central America or Asia rather than the Middle East, an area in which he had no background and little interest.[10] The timing of the speech did not reflect an awareness of the urgency of finding solutions to Middle East conflicts. Rather, Washington's instinct was to mollify an Arab world dangerously alienated by the war and to pre-empt condemnation of the United States by Arab leaders who, after anguished paralysis, had at last agreed to hold a summit at the Moroccan city of Fez on 6 September. Such was the rush for Reagan to make his speech that there was no time to fine-tune it, which may have been why Syria and the Golan Heights were not mentioned and why Washington did not consult Israel beforehand – a lapse which breached one of Kissinger's many pledges to Israel, that the United States would never take a Middle East initiative without first clearing it with its ally.

A shocked Begin responded by saying it was 'the saddest day of my life'. He was referring less to the failure to consult than to the content of the speech, for in a few nicely turned phrases Reagan seemed set to rob him of his life's ambition. The American president called for an immediate freeze on Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, pronounced in favour of Palestinian self-government 'in association with Jordan', and explicitly ruled out Israeli annexation, sovereignty or permanent domination over the occupied territories (as well, of course, as an independent Palestinian state). He affirmed Security Council Resolution 242 as the 'corner-stone' of American peace diplomacy, and interpreted it to mean an Israeli withdrawal on all fronts. Recalling that the Camp David accords had spoken of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, Reagan pressed for the Camp David process to be widened to include Jordan and the Palestinians so that a self-governing Palestinian authority could be elected to succeed Israeli rule. His ringing affirmation of America's unshakeable will to protect Israel's security did nothing to soften the blow. From Begin's point of view Israel had fought the 1967 war to 'liberate' the West Bank, had refused to let its grip be shaken in 1973, and had launched war on Lebanon in 1982 to make Greater Israel safe for all time. Now Reagan dared to give voice to Palestinian aspirations and actually proposed handing back the territories to the Arabs! Begin immediately authorized three new settlements on the West Bank. As far as he was concerned, the plan was a total non-starter.

Reagan did not satisfy the Arabs either. The Camp David accords which he held up as a model for a settlement were anathema to them. At their summit at Fez a few days later the Arab leaders set out their principles for a settlement, which in essence restated the plan put forward in 1981 by Crown Prince Fahd of Saudi Arabia. They demanded an Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 frontiers; the dismantling of settlements in the occupied territories; the exercise of Palestinian self-determination under PLO leadership, by the creation of a state on the West Bank and Gaza with its capital in East Jerusalem; and the right of Palestinian refugees to return home or to be compensated. The Fez plan implicitly recognized Israel's rights in a clause stating that 'the Security Council will guarantee peace for all the states of the region'.

Asad found himself caught between the Fahd and Reagan plans. He had refused to attend the 1981 Fez summit at which Prince Fahd first outlined his ideas because, with Begin then just back in office and flexing his muscles, it was not in his view the time to signal a readiness to talk. Peace, as he never tired of repeating, was not for the weak. But in 1982 he endorsed Fahd's plan at Fez because, with Israel triumphant, his priority was to deny it the political rewards of the war by closing Arab ranks. Above all, he wanted to prevent Jordan from venturing into negotiations with Israel under the Reagan plan, and supporting the Fahd plan was one way to do it. Asad's concern was to patch up his Levant environment which had been savaged by Israel's invasion of Lebanon. If Jordan were to slip into Israel's sphere of influence through a Camp David-type deal, he would be completely undermined.

Henry Kissinger had advised Shultz that, by weakening the PLO, the Lebanese War had created an opportunity to bring Jordan into the peace process. Taking this advice on board, Shultz encouraged King Husayn to attempt to persuade 'Arafat to give him a mandate for talks. But this was a development Asad felt he had to scotch – and this he did by pressure on the PLO not to yield to the king and on the king not to yield to Israel's embrace.

As a result of these developments, when Shultz came to assess the impact of the Reagan plan he found himself confronting an Israeli rebuff and Arab coolness. As he had expended a good deal of effort in getting Reagan to make the speech on 1 September, he was taken aback by this poor reception and grew wary of State Department

'Arabists' whose briefing document he felt had landed him in trouble. Disappointed on the score of a broad Middle East settlement, Shultz now put his energies into resolving the lesser problem of Israel-Lebanon relations – but here too he was to go seriously astray.

The problem was how best to set about restoring Lebanon's sovereignty, satisfying Israel's security needs and removing foreign armies from the battlefield. On these matters there were widely different points of view in the American camp. The negotiating model preferred by Philib Habib, for example, was the one he had used to good effect in defusing the 1981 missile crisis, that is to say, discreet soundings among the parties to establish what common ground there was leading to an informal 'understanding'. Habib's aim was a bare-bones security agreement between Israel and Lebanon regarding the south of the country which he thought could be put into effect before the end of 1982 while Asad was still weak.[11] But Habib needed a rest from his arduous Lebanese negotiations. He had a heart condition which had not been improved by the slanging matches with Sharon during the Beirut siege. He took off for California for a rest, leaving his assistant, Ambassador Morris Draper, in the field. On his return to Lebanon in December 1982, he discovered to his dismay that the formula he advocated had been dropped in favour of formal direct negotiations between Israel and Lebanon.

The reason was, of course, that Israel, wanting much more out of Lebanon than mere security arrangements in the south, was not satisfied with Habib's informal procedures. It had gone to war for the bigger prize of a peace treaty with a client state. And the more casualties its Lebanese adventure took, the more Israel felt it had to justify it by securing a fully-fledged treaty in face-to-face talks.

Habib made a last effort to head off what he thought a dangerous course. He embarked on a series of probings, first with Amin Jumayil and then with Begin and Sharon, in the hope of moving on to Asad and Fahd. But in Israel he got another nasty shock. He had begun outlining his ideas for a security arrangement when Sharon broke in: 'Wait a minute', he cried, waving a piece of paper, 'We don't need all that stuff you're talking about. I've already gotten an agreement with Amin's signature on it.' To secure his war aims, Sharon had bypassed the American intermediary and conducted secret talks with the Jumayil camp. Habib immediately adjourned the meeting and returned to Beirut.

'What have you done?' he screamed at Amin. 'Why didn't you tell me you were negotiating with the Israelis?'

Amin huffed and puffed. 'There isn't an agreement, only tentative guidelines.' He denied signing anything.[12] But the fact was that his private deal with Sharon had gravely weakened Lebanon's hand and put an end to Habib's attempt to get the rival armies out of Lebanon by informal understandings arrived at quietly.

The debate between advocates of informal soundings and direct talks was then resolved in favour of the latter by Kenneth Dam, deputy Secretary of State, but it is inconceivable that he could have acted without Shultz's support. Accordingly Israel-Lebanon talks opened under US auspices on 28 December 1982, with sessions being held alternately at Kiryat Shemona in Israel and Khalda in Lebanon. They dragged on for four months, in 138 hours of not always amicable bargaining.

A second Camp David?

The course of the negotiations and their eventual outcome owed much to the evolution of Shultz's own position. In the autumn of 1982 the Israelis considered him an enemy, the evil genius behind the Reagan plan, the pro-Arab Bechtel executive; but by the spring of 1983 he was their darling. He had evidently succumbed, like others before him, to the drip-on-stone tactics of the pro-Israel lobby, which had recovered from the embarrassments of the Lebanese War and from the unfavourable television coverage of the Beirut siege and the Sabra and Shatila massacres. American Jews had at first hesitated to endorse Begin's invasion, afraid of being accused of greater loyalty to Israel than to the United States, and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee had even begun by giving the Reagan plan a cautious welcome. It was only when the Arabs at Fez failed to welcome the plan that the lobby recovered its nerve, defended the Lebanon War and focused its campaign on Shultz. This proud but thin-skinned man was not inclined to put up a fight against the great political influence Israel could bring to bear on American decision-making.

The Washington story was that Under-Secretary of State Laurence Eagleburger, an Israeli supporter and Kissinger protégé, played a role in his conversion. 'George', he is alleged to have said to him, 'do you want to be a successful Secretary? Do you want to contribute to arms control, conduct East-West negotiations, save the world economy? Then don't piss with the Israelis. If you do, you won't get anything done.' Moshe Arens, Israel's ambassador in Washington who took over the Defence Ministry in February 1983 when Sharon was forced to resign after the publication of the Kahan Commission's report on

the Beirut massacres, also contributed to the Secretary of State's change of heart. An MIT graduate like Shultz and the essence of reasonableness in contrast to Sharon's bluster, Arens was quick to offer the United States access to what Israel had learned about Soviet weapons and strategy during the war, information which Israel had at first withheld in its opposition to the Reagan plan. With such sweeteners Arens may have helped persuade the Secretary to support Israel's demand for a peace treaty. In any event, Shultz came to believe that a second version of the Camp David accords, this time between Israel and Lebanon, was both feasible and desirable.

In lending his weight to the Israel-Lebanon negotiations Shultz may also have been affected by the loss of a trusted adviser at this time. On 18 April 1983, a truck packed with explosives rammed the US embassy in West Beirut, bringing down much of the structure. Among the sixty-three dead were seventeen Americans, and among them the CIA station chief, his deputy, half a dozen CIA officers – and Robert Ames, the agency's chief Middle East analyst, who had flown to Beirut to investigate the new phenomenon of Shi'i terror of which he was almost certainly a victim. Ames had been one of Shultz's key advisers: his death robbed the Secretary of State of sound judgment at a critical moment and hardened his heart against America's critics in the Middle East, chief among whom was Asad's Syria. The CIA was convinced the Iranians were behind the embassy's destruction but suspected the Syrians of complicity.[13]

At the Israel-Lebanon talks the chief Israeli negotiator was David Kimche, Israel's 'Mr Lebanon'. First with Mossad, then as director-general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, he had been the architect of the Phalanges connection. He was assisted by Major-General Avraham Tamir, Sharon's representative. On the Lebanese side were Antoine Fattal (a man originally of Syrian origin whom Damascus later sought to put on trial), and Brigadier-General 'Abbas Hamdan. In the weeks of nitpicking, Kimche tied up the Lebanese in an elaborate net of legal restrictions and controls. Habib became increasingly exasperated with the daily bickering. 'Let me off the hook', he exploded to Kimche. 'You've got a peace treaty in all but name.'[14]

Yet it required Shultz's personal intervention to bring the negotiations to a conclusion. The problem was that Israel's proposed agreement with Lebanon did not make sense so long as Syrian troops remained strongly entrenched in the country. How to get them out? The dilemma had not been tackled. The question for Shultz when he arrived in the Middle East in April 1983 was whether to engage Asad in negotiations before the Israel-Lebanon accord was finalized or present him with a

fait accompli. For a week or so Shultz kept his options open.

He summoned American ambassadors in the region to a conference in Cairo to sound out their views. Richard Murphy arrived from Saudi Arabia, Richard Viets from Jordan, Robert Dillon from Lebanon, and from Syria Robert Paganelli who bluntly told Shultz that the blatant disregard of Syria's interests in the proposed accord made Asad's opposition inevitable. Affronted by Paganelli's plain speaking, Shultz dismissed the warning. He had no real grasp of Asad's reasons for dreading an Israeli overlordship in Lebanon, nor did he appreciate the depth of Asad's resentment at what the Syrian saw as Washington's 'betrayal' over the 11 June 1982 ceasefire. He may have remembered that, in Washington in July 1982, Foreign Minister Khaddam had expressed Syria's willingness to withdraw from Lebanon if Israel also did so, and he now believed that Asad would bow to the inevitable. The Saudis and the Lebanese were assuring him that this was so. Perhaps also Shultz could not conceive that a poor Third World country with a population of under ten million could stand up to him. Above all, he failed to realize the extent to which Asad had recovered from the defeat of 1982.

Part of the problem was the lack of American communication with Damascus. Paganelli knew the Syrian mind but Shultz gave him no credence. From the start of the formal Israel-Lebanon talks in December 1982 there had been no attempt to draw the Syrians in. Philip Habib, who had negotiated with Asad over the Biqa' missiles in 1981, over the unfortunate 1982 ceasefire, and again over the PLO evacuation plan, and who knew him better than any other American, was himself out of play at this crucial moment. Asad would not see him. He declared him *persona non grata* claiming that Habib had deceived him over the 11 June ceasefire. The Syrians were disenchanted with the line Habib tended to take in Damascus – that he was on their side, that the Israelis were being tough, that the Syrians should help him to help them. But, such minor irritations apart, Asad refused to let Habib into Syria in May 1983 to express his displeasure with the whole thrust of US policy and particularly with the Israel-Lebanon accord then about to be concluded.

To tie up the loose ends Shultz embarked on a shuttle between Beirut and Jerusalem and by 4 May, after seeing Begin no fewer than six times, he had a draft ready for signature. But the problem of how to get the Syrian army out of Lebanon remained unsolved. To cover themselves the Israelis asked Shultz for a private pledge, incorporated in a side-letter, that they would not be obliged to implement the accord so long as Syrian, and indeed Palestinian, forces had not withdrawn

from Lebanon. This was an imprudent move. They had given Asad a veto over the proceedings.

On 7 May, Shultz travelled to Damascus in the hope that he could briskly clear away what he saw as the last obstacle to his peace-making. He was confident that between the carrot of Saudi aid and the US-Israeli stick Asad would, perhaps after some face-saving rhetoric, end up by endorsing the accord. But he had misjudged his man. Asad would not let himself be bullied by a more powerful adversary and, in characteristic style, he treated the Secretary to a five-hour history lesson. He recited the Arabs' struggle to contain Israel and their resentment at America's indifference to their aspirations and its blind support for their enemy. Now the United States proposed rewarding Israel for its aggression. It was to be allowed to change Lebanon's Arab character, to threaten the security of Arab states such as Syria, and to impose its hegemony on the region. He would not bow to such a US-Israeli *diktat*. He would consider withdrawing his troops from Lebanon only after an unconditional and total Israeli withdrawal. The right way forward, he advised Shultz, lay in the strict implementation of Security Council Resolutions 508 and 509 for which the United States itself had voted.

This interview with Asad was among the least agreeable experiences of Shultz's career. He was not used to such scoldings. Moreover, if Syria stayed put in Lebanon, his accord was in jeopardy, but he realized that to embark on an extended negotiation such as Asad seemed to want would involve reopening the Arab-Israeli dispute in its entirety – the Golan, Palestinian rights, an Israeli withdrawal on all fronts, a comprehensive settlement. So much he learned in Damascus. It was an unthinkable agenda. After a stopover in Riyadh to plead for Saudi pressure on Damascus, Shultz returned to Beirut, angry and affronted but determined to press ahead.

The Secretary of State was not spared a painful encounter with the Lebanese Prime Minister, Shafiq al-Wazzan, with whom he discussed the draft treaty. A sound but simple patriot, the son of a baker, Wazzan saw clearly where Shultz's diplomacy was leading. 'I must tell you, Mr Secretary', he said, 'that I am ashamed and unhappy at the terms of this accord which I will only sign with the utmost reluctance. Is this all that the great United States can secure for us?'[15] Shultz told the Lebanese, to their utter dismay, that it was up to them to talk the Syrians into pulling out. The feeble Lebanese government had looked to the United States to protect it both from Israel's demands and from Syria's pressures. Professor Elie Salem, Lebanon's Foreign Minister at the time, later commented ruefully:[16]

> Lebanon was like a child that is taken for a walk by his aunt. We shouldn't have trusted our aunt. I have learned that great powers are often less honest than small ones.

On 17 May the Israel-Lebanon agreement was signed at both Khalda in Lebanon and Qiryat Shemona in Israel. Israel had wanted a lot from its helpless neighbour – diplomatic relations, freedom of movement of goods and persons, a continued Israeli military presence in the south. In the event these stiff terms were trimmed down somewhat as a sop to Lebanon's self-esteem and to its anxiety about Arab reactions, but the final text[17] was nevertheless an astonishing straitjacket on Lebanon's sovereignty.

Instead of official diplomatic relations, Israel secured a 'liaison office' on Lebanese territory, not quite an embassy. Full normalization was to be deferred until after the withdrawal of Israeli troops. But over the whole of the south Israel now exerted considerable control. Its proxy militia under Major Sa'd Haddad, although attached to the Lebanese army, was to remain a separate force patrolling the frontier up to the Zahrani river. (It was privately agreed that Israel would have to approve any successor to Haddad.) In a further zone beyond Haddad's and up to the Awali river, Lebanon could deploy only a single brigade with strict limits on its weapons and equipment. No Lebanese military radars would be allowed to probe into Israel nor would high-altitude SAMs be tolerated. Lebanon would have to give Israel advance notice of flights of any kind over the entire security area. In addition, Israeli military personnel would be present in the south within eight joint Israeli-Lebanese supervisory teams, whose job was to detect and destroy any hostile guerrilla forces.

And this was not the whole of it. The accord formally ended the state of war between Israel and Lebanon, obliged Lebanon to prohibit any manifestation on its territory of hostility to Israel from guerrilla activity to mere propaganda, and banned the passage through Lebanon or its air space of forces, weapons or equipment to or from any state not having diplomatic relations with Israel – in fact the whole Arab world except Egypt. It also enjoined Lebanon to abrogate within a year any treaties, laws or regulations in conflict with its accord with Israel – in fact all the commitments it had assumed at Arab summits and as a member of the Arab League. 'The Israelis are like a thief who gets you to empty your purse, then pauses to tweak the handkerchief from your breast pocket', was Professor Salem's sour comment.[18]

With the publication of the accord a little less than a year after the invasion, it looked as if Israel had won not only the war but also the

peace, altering the whole strategic balance of the area. It had been a gory, messy affair, but Lebanon had been brought into its sphere of influence and Syrian power was neutralized. Everyone knew Asad detested the outcome but as so often in the past – over Sinai Two, over Camp David, over the Egypt-Israel peace treaty – he would simply have to put up with it. As Habib commented: 'We know that Syria will not willingly accept the terms and conditions of the accord. It must now accept them unwillingly.'[19] *Pax Hebraica* seemed the new reality.

Battle lines drawn

Israel's new order spelled death to Asad: reduced to insignificance in the region, he risked losing power in Syria itself. The battle of the accord was one he could not evade, and by the summer of 1983, with local allies and Soviet protection, he was in better shape to fight it than his enemies realized. The crisis brought out in sharp relief his characteristic qualities: a conviction of moral and political rectitude, a cool head under fire, colossal stubbornness, and a readiness to fight, even to fight dirty in what he saw as a national cause. Above all, Asad had the patience required for a long haul – a bedouin virtue which could seem more like persistence in revenge. The Arabs tell a story of a tribal chief who bragged to another that he had avenged a slight suffered by his clan forty years earlier. 'You acted hastily', the other chief reproved. Asad's obstinacy had something of this enduring quality.

Into the struggle he threw every resource, every ounce of cunning and nervous energy, setting up at the Presidency something like an operational headquarters from which lines went out to all parts of Lebanon. He had to make his will prevail on every front – in Beirut, East and West, in the northern port of Tripoli, in the Biqa' valley, in the Shuf mountains, and in the devastated south where the Shi'a were beginning to confront the Israeli invaders.

The signature of the accord on 17 May 1983 was the signal for a stream of invective from Damascus against the 'stooges', 'agents' and 'isolationists' who had signed it. The Lebanese government was threatened with a new civil war. The accord was decried as a Phalanges-Israeli agreement designed to give supremacy to the Maronites over every other community in Lebanon and to turn the whole country into an Israeli protectorate. Asad declared the 'contract of submission' stillborn. Four days before the signature Syria's chief Lebanese allies had held a council of war in Zghorta, the north Lebanon fief of Asad's Maronite friend, ex-President Sulayman

Franjiya. There were gathered, apart from Franjiya himself, the Sunni leader from Tripoli Rashid Karami, the Druze Walid Junblatt, George Hawi of the Lebanese Communist Party, In'am Ra'd of the SSNP, and 'Asim Qansuh of the Lebanese Ba'th party. In the coming weeks they coalesced with Asad's encouragement into a National Salvation Front which vowed to fight the accord, overturn Maronite hegemony, confront Israel's occupation and rebuild a 'new Lebanon'.[20] Syria claimed that these men were more representative of the real Lebanon than Jumayil's 'treacherous' government – a point of view it underlined by shelling the main Christian port of Junieh.

Jumayil was not Asad's only target. 'Arafat was another challenger to be put down if Syria was to regain the initiative not just in Lebanon but in the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole. The long-standing quarrel between Asad and 'Arafat, beginning with 'Arafat's imprisonment in Syria in 1966, and steadily envenomed by Black September in 1970, by the Lebanese crisis of 1976 and by Israel's first invasion of 1978, had been carried to the point of total rupture in the 1982 war. 'Arafat had mortally offended Asad by not giving Syria credit for its military sacrifices and by deciding against going to Damascus when the time came for him to be evacuated from Beirut. Moreover, by toying with the Reagan plan, by negotiating with King Husayn over a formula for peace talks, and more generally by upholding his old claim to an 'independent Palestinian decision', he threatened the very foundations of Asad's regional strategy.

Many Palestinian fighters living under Syrian control in the Biqa' valley, a good number of them members of 'Arafat's own Fatah movement, were critical of the way the Palestinian resistance had quickly collapsed in south Lebanon in the face of Israel's onslaught. They also contested the PLO chairman's decision to leave Beirut and his apparent willingness to consider a political compromise. Led by two Palestinian colonels, Abu Musa and Abu Salih, the dissidents rose against 'Arafat in the Biqa' in May 1983, fought pitched battles with men loyal to him, and with Syrian support gained the upper hand. 'Arafat hurried to the Biqa' and to Damascus to rally his supporters, but Asad, wholly committed to the struggle for Lebanon, would tolerate no such distractions from his main purpose. On 24 June, 'Arafat was expelled from Syria, in a move which dramatized the breach and underlined Asad's own claim to hold the key to the Palestine problem.

By this time Washington was waking up to the failings of its diplomacy: Asad had been allowed to rearm while the Lebanese government which he opposed was woefully precarious. It was time to

rethink basic strategy and attempt to engage Asad in a belated dialogue.[21] On 6 July Shultz subjected himself to another gruelling five hours with Asad but without managing to soften his irrevocable rejection of the accord. To maintain contact, Washington found a replacement for Habib in the person of Robert McFarlane, assistant national security adviser, who paid his first visit to Damascus on 6 August, just a month after Shultz. His brief was to discover what exactly were Asad's conditions for withdrawing from Lebanon.

Asad in turn did not want a severance of contact and kept the door open to Washington, agreeing to the formation of a US-Syrian working commission to consult on Lebanon. A couple of weeks later, in an evident gesture of goodwill, he engineered the freeing of David Dodge, the acting president of the American University of Beirut who had been abducted by a pro-Iranian group a year earlier. Syrian agents actually rescued Dodge from Tehran, an index of Asad's interest in a relationship with the United States if it could be on his terms.

Over the years, Asad had developed a negotiating technique which he frequently used with foreign guests, and McFarlane was no exception. He would begin by exchanging a few pleasantries. Then he might ask, 'How is the weather in your country?' A Western guest would usually reply to the effect that at home it was colder than in Syria, giving Asad his opportunity. 'Indeed', he would say, 'it's warm here because the United States is stoking the fire!' There were two sorts of climate in the world, he would explain, one given by God, the other by the United States, and step by step he would make his point that the tensions, crises and wars in the area must all be laid at Washington's door. An American visitor would feel compelled to defend himself, starting the meeting at a disadvantage. Asad's next stratagem was to be extraordinarily digressive and argumentative. If the name of God were mentioned, for example, this might set him off on a long discourse about Islam, Judaism and Christianity before he could be brought back to the matter in hand. Negotiating sessions would last for hours. More than one envoy who suffered this treatment came to the conclusion that Asad raised all sorts of irrelevant subjects simply to tire his visitors the better to control them. At the end of a wearisome session the temptation was to accept what he had to say simply to escape.

Asad's good memory rarely failed to impress. He did not take notes at meetings, never called for pen and paper even in complicated discussions. If a visitor raised six points with him, he might spend an hour answering the first point, then move smoothly through the others in the right order. With Robert McFarlane the unexpected gambit Asad chose was to pose a question about the role of women in American

politics, to which McFarlane was at a loss to reply, whereupon Asad launched into a prolonged account of women in Syrian affairs, regretting his failure to advance them further in politics.

When McFarlane got a chance to get down to business he stressed, in line with the new American thinking, that the United States wanted a fair Lebanese settlement which took Syria's interests into account, including a complete Israeli withdrawal. This was not sufficient for Asad. He was open to suggestions but he remained unconvinced that the Americans had grasped the difference between the Syrian and Israeli presence in Lebanon. Syria's influence was legitimate and had to prevail. Syria and Lebanon were one people, one nation, one geography. Israel was an alien presence. On the question of withdrawal McFarlane found him evasive.[22] In a newspaper interview at the time Asad declared:[23]

> It is a mistake for anyone to believe or to think that we will ever leave Lebanon as a morsel which it is easy for the Israelis to swallow because Lebanon is an Arab country to which we are bound by a common history and a common destiny.

This uncompromising tone was predictable because by August Asad and his Lebanese allies were ready to mount a major assault on President Jumayil.

The battle of the accord

On the eve of battle Asad could take heart from clear signs of disarray in the Israeli camp. Some Israelis were beginning to admit that they had been too greedy in negotiating the accord; its implementation was in doubt; and with continuing guerrilla harassment, Israeli leaders were beginning to ponder whether it would not be wise to pull back unilaterally from the Beirut-Damascus road and the Shuf mountains to a more secure line on the Awali river further south.

The clearest signal that Israel's hopes in the war were collapsing was the psychological change which had occurred in Begin himself. As early as July 1982 American envoys noted that, though he remained dogged, his once defiant confidence had leaked away. The 'Chinese torture' of the mounting Israeli casualties seemed to be taking its toll on him. Even hard-line Moshe Arens and leading officials like David Kimche appeared to have lost faith in the overall strategy.[24] For Begin there was also a personal factor. His wife Aliza to whom he was greatly

attached died on 14 November 1982, plunging him into deep depression. But the very week which saw Begin brought low, put Asad on the mend. On 15 November the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev was buried and, vigorously backed by his successor Andropov, Asad began his climb-back. Ten months later when Asad was ready for battle, Begin had given up the fight. On 29 August 1983 he told his shocked cabinet colleagues of his intention to resign and immediately secluded himself in his modest house on Ben Nun Street in West Jerusalem, not to reappear. The premiership passed to Yitzhak Shamir.

Two crucial engagements were then fought, the first, brief and brutal, in Beirut itself, the second more prolonged in the Shuf mountains overlooking Beirut. From 28 August to 2 September troops of the Amal militia, in the first major Shi'i challenge to President Jumayil, took on the Lebanese army for control of West Beirut. Although they were narrowly defeated, with heavy casualties on both sides, the message of the revolt was that the Shi'a, hitherto on the fence, now openly sided with Syria against Israel and its Lebanese protégés. These were not the B'albak-based Islamic extremists inspired by Iran who were already in Asad's camp, but the Shi'i mainstream of southern Lebanon represented by Nabih Berri's Amal movement.

The battle for the Shuf was the real turning-point in the Syrian-Israeli contest. It began on 3 September as Israel, anxious to minimize its army's exposure, withdrew to the Awali. By this stage Israel had recognized the error of undue reliance on the Maronites and was attempting to reach understandings with the Shi'a and Druzes, but it was too late. In the Shuf the vacuum created by the Israeli withdrawal left the indigenous Druzes of Walid Junblatt face to face with their traditional enemies, the Maronite fighters of the Lebanese Forces whom Israel had brought into the mountains after its invasion.

In the explosion of violence that followed, Druze forces, stiffened by some 2,000 Palestinians and supported by Syrian artillery and tanks (with some tactical advice from Russian officers), routed the Maronite militiamen. The engagement grew into a vast settling of sectarian scores, with mutual massacres of Druzes and Christians, the displacement of tens of thousands on both sides, and the stampeding of about 100,000 Christians towards Beirut and the now besieged Maronite stronghold of Dayr al-Qamar. The Lebanese army joined the fray against the Druzes in mid-September but failed to tip the balance. By the 24th the triumphant Druzes, backed by Syrian heavy guns, had linked up with Amal in the southern suburbs of Beirut, while the presidential palace, foreign embassies, East Beirut, and the Christian heartlands further north were all exposed to artillery bombardment. Syria's proxies had proved more powerful than those of Israel.

The reversal of fortunes aroused intense concern in Israel and the United States, but also in Europe as contingents of French, Italian and British troops were serving in Lebanon in the multinational force. It was now becoming clear that, by forcing Lebanon into an unequal accord with Israel, Shultz had exposed Jumayil's government to ferocious attack, while Israel's withdrawal to a southern defence line had left the United States holding the Lebanese baby. Intervening in support of the beleaguered Jumayil, aircraft from the US Sixth Fleet struck at Druze and Palestinian artillery emplacements in the mountains on 17 and 19 September, and on the 21st naval guns opened up.

On 23 September McFarlane met Asad to insist on a ceasefire and a halt to Palestinian and Syrian reinforcements for the Druzes. Consciously seeking to overcome the 'Vietnam syndrome' – America's doubts about military action in the aftermath of its south-east Asian débâcle – McFarlane shared George Shultz's view that the United States should be ready to use force in support of its diplomacy. So, on taking leave of Asad, he dropped a bombshell of his own: 'By the way', he said casually, 'the USS *New Jersey* will be off Lebanon within twenty-four hours.'[25]

McFarlane came to believe that this veiled threat might have brought about the Shuf ceasefire which was agreed two days later, on 25 September. In fact, Asad had for the moment got everything he wanted and was ready to fall in with ceasefire proposals worked out in several weeks of shuttling between Damascus and Beirut by Prince Bandar ibn Sultan, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Washington, and the Saudi-Lebanese tycoon, Rafiq al-Hariri. Syria had been projected to centre stage.

Throughout the summer Asad stiffened his terms: he would consider quitting Lebanon only if Israel pulled out unconditionally, if the multinational force withdrew, and if Lebanon were ruled by a government of national unity. The Lebanon-Israel accord had to be torn up: 'America master-minded this agreement. America has to abrogate it.'[26]

In October 1983 Asad's proxies were able to throw Israel and the United States on the defensive. For Israel the turning-point probably came on 16 October when Israeli troops clashed with a crowd of 150,000 Shi'a who had gathered in the southern Lebanese town of Nabatiya for the 'Ashura ceremonies, the annual commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet, in 680 AD.[27] The

riots which followed, the killings of civilians by Israeli troops and the curfews they tried to impose roused the Shi'i population of the south as never before. The results were seen in a rash of guerrilla assaults which by the end of the year had claimed another forty Israeli lives. A further blow to Israel was the death in January 1984 of its faithful ally in the border region, Major Sa'd Haddad, who was replaced as head of the Israeli-sponsored South Lebanon Army by Colonel Antoine Lahad – promptly labelled a traitor by Syria. The IDF's pull-back continued in 1984 and by 1985 Israel contented itself with a narrow self-proclaimed 'security zone' in Lebanon.

Inevitably Shi'i anger was directed also at Israel's American patron. On 23 October 1983 the marine contingent at Beirut airport, whose ill-defined mission[28] had not protected it from being sucked into the Lebanese turmoil, suffered a calamitous car-bomb attack which at a stroke killed 241 men. On the same morning, in reprisal for an air raid, the French contingent of the MNF was also car-bombed with the loss of 56 men. Pressure mounted for the recall of the Western forces. But the agony was not yet over.

With McFarlane promoted to National Security Adviser early in November (after William Clark had fallen to sniping from Shultz), yet another American envoy was sent out to deal with Asad and rescue what could be salvaged of US policy. Donald Rumsfeld was an able man who had been chief of staff at the White House and ambassador to NATO. But he came to Syria wearing an Israeli shackle: Washington had promised Jerusalem that he would not be permitted to propose amendments of his own to the 17 May accord but would raise with Asad only such ideas as Israel might wish to put forward. This was an odd position for a negotiator to be in. A second constraint on Rumsfeld was the wrangle which raged in the US government about the use of force. Pro-Israeli officials, like the Kissinger protégé Peter Rodman at the National Security Council, thought Rumsfeld should arrive in Damascus after a show of strength. Shultz himself, his policy sabotaged by Asad, was now petulantly anti-Syrian and ready to unleash the Sixth Fleet. But Defense Secretary Weinberger, who had wanted to pull the marines out of Lebanon even before the 23 October carnage, opposed a rogue policy of force. The row paralysed the Administration. Rumsfeld could neither offer Asad inducements because Israel would not let him, nor threaten punishment because Washington was divided.

Asad clung tenaciously to his objectives, and first and foremost the abrogation of the accord. Rumsfeld argued and shuttled, and (in spite of Paganelli's warnings from the Damascus embassy, a lone voice crying in the wilderness), warplanes and naval guns of the Sixth Fleet went into action in December and again in the new year, the *New Jersey* hurling projectiles the size of Volkswagens to crash ineffectually into the Lebanese mountains. With the tide now running strongly his way, Asad remained unmoved.

McFarlane was eventually to concede the American mistake:[29]

> Our people would have been better off if they had taken the advice of that old comic W. C. Fields: Never kick a man unless he is down. Asad was wounded in 1982 but he was not entirely down, and that was the time not to humiliate him but to engage him. I don't pretend that the Syrians would have come to terms right away, but by ignoring them we suffered two casualties. We affronted President Asad, a man with pan-Arab ambitions, and, equally importantly, we allowed him to become stronger. I think it expressed a rather primitive American understanding of the Middle East to assume that a stable outcome in Lebanon could have been forged without Syria's participation. We made it almost certain Asad would be a spoiler.

On one day of particular American humiliation, 4 December 1983, eight more marines were slain at the airport and two US planes were shot down by Syrian gunfire, giving the black Civil rights leader, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, the political bonus at the turn of the year of coming to Damascus to recover a surviving aviator, Robert Goodman. After a good many more alarms the Italian, French, British and American contingents of the MNF were called home in the early months of 1984.

Asad and his allies had won. Asad for one was somewhat incredulous that the United States had given up so easily. He told another Arab ruler: 'The Americans are like children. When we opposed their policy in Lebanon, they launched one or two raids against us. We fired in the air and, lo and behold, two of their planes were shot down. So they pulled out! Well, let them go!' he said in a great gust of laughter. 'Let them go!'

Once his Western protectors had gone, Amin Jumayil was at Asad's mercy and on 29 February 1984 he travelled to Damascus to pay homage and announce his readiness to abrogate the accord. This was formally done five days later.[30] The Biqa' was firmly in Syrian hands, the Shuf controlled by the Druzes, the Shi'a were driving out the Israelis. Much had been gained.

But Asad had also to conduct a whole series of other battles in the second half of 1983 for the control of the northern port of Tripoli, the

first of which was against a local Islamic leader, Shaykh Sa'd Sha'ban whose Tawhid movement derived support from Asad's old enemies, Muslim activists who had fled from Hama. Scarcely had Sha'ban been tamed than Yasir 'Arafat appeared in Tripoli in September 1983 and it took weeks of savage fighting by Fatah dissidents backed by Syria to dislodge him.

Part of this swirling current of violence passed Asad by. Strained to breaking point by the fearful struggles of 1982 and 1983, not to speak of five years of deadly combat with the Muslim Brothers before that, and indeed by a lifetime of unremitting labour, he collapsed on 12 November 1983, going into hospital with a heart complaint which threatened to put an end to a tumultuous period of Syrian history. For Asad, however, it was the exhaustion of victory and not, as for Begin, that of defeat.

The balance sheet

Begin's failure in 1982 to impose his terms on the Arabs marked the first involuntary retreat by Israel from the peak of power it had reached in 1967. It meant too that Greater Israel could no longer be built in an unchallenged environment, and it may have been this disappointment which drove Begin from office. Failure to defeat and expel Syria in June 1982 gave Asad the chance to fight back. Failure to obliterate 'Arafat and his movement ensured the PLO's ultimate revival but, this apart, it was an Israeli mistake to imagine that smashing the PLO's Lebanese infrastructure would somehow break the national spirit of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. The uprising in Gaza and the West Bank which began in December 1987 had its roots in Israel's setback in Lebanon in 1983. Other Israeli errors were to try to build a friendly Lebanon, able to deliver a 'second peace treaty', on minority Maronite rule at a time when rival communities like the Shi'a and even the Druzes were on the ascent. Above all, in seeking to compel its weaker neighbour to come to terms, Israel was too brutal in attack, too indifferent to Arab life, too demanding in negotiation and too scornful of Lebanon's sovereignty. Such abuses raised up ferocious enemies on Israel's border. Begin's crude interventionism greatly set back the cause of Arab-Israeli co-existence, causing men like Asad to doubt whether it would ever be possible to live with such a neighbour.

The United States, and George Shultz personally, suffered a mini-Vietnam as America's might was seen to be ineffective and its diplomacy unsuccessful. Having allowed Israel into Lebanon, it was unable to protect the Palestinians from massacre, the Lebanese government from its enemies, the accord from destruction, and even its own marines from maiming and death. The ignominious scuttle from Lebanon in early 1984 marked the lowest point in American fortunes in the Middle East since the Second World War. This nemesis was the result of a steady departure from an independent Middle East policy and the pursuit instead of actions aligned with or manipulated by Israel. The journey down this road began with the Six Day War when the United States condoned Israel's blitz, picked up speed when Henry Kissinger was in the driving seat, and reached collision point in the faltering hands of the Reagan Administration. America's failure was one of omission, of passivity: it allowed its ally to overreach itself – in illegal settlements on Arab land, in raids and annexations from Baghdad to the Golan, in repeated ceasefire violations, and then in the invasion of Lebanon. Washington paid the bills but could exercise no control.

The Lebanese misadventure did not cause Shultz to correct his aim. On the contrary, perhaps because he took the defeat personally, he plunged even deeper into the relationship with Israel, championing a full-blown military alliance and coming to see Arab and Iranian terrorism as a phenomenon quite separate from its causes, a blindness which was to draw the United States into the quagmires of counter-terror, hostage taking, Irangate and other murky enterprises. Just as Carter found himself completing Kissinger's agenda, so Shultz completed Haig's: the ill-fated Israel-Lebanon accord, Israel's reward for its invasion, was in a direct line of descent from Haig's 'green light'.

For Asad, the defeat of Begin and of Shultz was the foreign policy triumph of his presidency. The 1982 war was not only a war for Lebanon or for the West Bank, but also a war to determine whose will was to prevail in the Middle East. Against great odds Asad managed to frustrate Israel's bid for hegemony and hold the line. Almost for the first time in their modern history, the Arabs came to realize that there was no preordained fatality about an Israeli victory or their own defeat.

But Asad's efforts to defend the Arab Levant against Israeli incursions meant riding roughshod over the narrower but no less legitimate interests of those Lebanese, Palestinians and Jordanians who disagreed with his strategy and wished to pursue their own salvation free from the dictates of Damascus. To the extent that these lesser actors continued to defy him, Asad's victory was not total, nor was he able in the coming years to substitute for Israel's proposed new order a stable order of his own.

There was a further consideration. The defeat of Israel and of the United States involved the use of irregular methods: Bashir Jumayil was assassinated, the American embassy blown up, the marines slaughtered, the Israelis harried by hit-and-run guerrillas. Syria was not necessarily directly implicated in these acts of violence but it supported the people who carried them out and above all it benefited from them. Were such methods a resort to terrorism or the legitimate tactics of national resistance? Was Bashir a patriot or a Quisling? Was the multinational force of Americans and Europeans a neutral peacekeeper or did it degenerate into just another militia in the Lebanese civil war, attempting to impose an alien order? Asad was a cautious, responsible leader who for years had painstakingly sought to explain Arab fears and hopes, rights and grievances to a succession of American visitors – Kissinger, Nixon, Carter, Vance, Brzezinski, Shultz, Habib, McFarlane, and the rest. But after all those hours of patient exposition he had not been heard. By condoning Israel's 1982 war the United States had shown a disregard of his interests, convincing him that he was to be driven to the edge of national extinction. With his back to the wall he fought with the means at his disposal. The paradox was that he was a man of order who detested anarchy and was intensely conscious of the risks of using violent and not wholly controllable surrogates. But he felt he had no choice. 'If they really want us to be terrorists, we can be', he told his Druze ally, Walid Junblatt.[31]

In late April 1984 Peter Jennings of ABC asked Asad in a television interview whether he viewed terrorism as a legitimate tool of war. Asad replied:[32]

> We are against terrorism. But what is terrorism? Terrorism is one country invading another, occupying its land and expelling its people. If you mean by terrorism acts committed by gangs of robbers and murderers and the like, we are against it. But the acts of people against the occupiers of their land have not throughout history been known as acts of terrorism. We support the national resistance of all peoples . . .

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The Brothers' War

On 12 November 1983 after working late in the ground floor office of his residence, Asad felt unwell. He went upstairs to bed, slept poorly and in the morning telephoned his doctor. After examining him, the doctor called in another physician for a second opinion. They recommended immediate treatment for a suspected heart complaint.[1]

Asad was taken to the Shami hospital in Damascus where he was placed in intensive care. Although the specialists detected some irregularity in his heart beat, they could find nothing organically wrong with him. He had long suffered from diabetes, aggravated by a sweet tooth, and as a young man had complained of headaches and eye strain. But these were old complaints which he had come to terms with. The truth was that the once fit pilot officer had undermined his health by years of irregular meals, lack of fresh air and exercise, and unremitting work. The sedentary life had produced varicose veins, for which he had had an operation, and the doctors now feared that phlebitis might set in. But the real cause of his collapse was exhaustion: Asad was simply worn out. The master of Syria for thirteen years was suddenly taken out of play.

His doctors ordered a complete rest and gave him powerful sedatives to enforce it. Asad, who rarely took sleeping pills, found himself dazed and unsteady. This incapacity and the fact that his door was barred by his doctors even to the top men of the regime aroused the wildest uncertainties. Leaderless and panic-stricken, believing him to be on the point of death, his associates sought to gain time by lamely announcing to the public that the president was being treated for appendicitis. The structure Asad had built, wholly dependent on himself, was in danger of breaking down without him.

Asad collapsed at the height of his battle royal for Lebanon. Less than three weeks earlier the American marines had been slaughtered and it seemed that a riposte against Syria, considered an accomplice of

the assault, could not be long delayed. US aircraft were overflying Syrian positions in the Lebanese mountains. The armada including the formidable *New Jersey*, symbol of Washington's will to outface him, had already used its guns against his allies. As Asad turned the screw on Amin Jumayil to force him to abrogate the Israel-Lebanon accord, a shooting war with the United States seemed only too probable. And just then Yuri Andropov, the Soviet leader who had given him weapons and guarantees on an unprecedented scale, fell desperately ill. On 11 November Foreign Minister Khaddam returned from an overnight hop to Moscow with the grim news that Andropov was dying and the Kremlin in no shape to take bold or quick decisions. Asad's deterrent posture against Israel was threatened. Worry about Andropov undoubtedly contributed to Asad's own collapse.[2]

The United States was not the only enemy Syria was jousting with that November. Israel was intensifying reprisal raids on the Biqa' and along the Beirut-Damascus highway, following the blowing up in early November of an Israeli intelligence headquarters in Tyre in which twenty-nine people had been killed. President Mitterrand of France had condemned Syrian intervention in Lebanon and vowed that the French contingent car-bombed at the same time as the US marines would be avenged. In Tripoli, the ferocious clash of wills between 'Arafat and Syrian-backed Fatah dissidents was reaching a climax. The Nahr al-Barid camp, an 'Arafat stronghold, had been overrun and the casualties ran into hundreds. To tighten the siege, Syrian artillery had set fire to the refinery and the port, causing damage put at tens of millions of dollars. With 'Arafat holed up in his Tripoli bunker, Damascus had come under intense Arab pressure to end the shameful inter-Arab scrap, but Asad had developed an implacable hatred for the PLO chairman and was determined to throw him into the sea.

In Lebanon as a whole, Israel's order had been defeated but Syria's was by no means imposed. A clutch of leading Lebanese politicians – Maronite, Sunni, Shi'i and Druze – had met in Geneva from 31 October to 8 November, for a 'conference of national reconciliation', in a forlorn attempt to put their shattered country together again. All had come to recognize Syria as the ringmaster, and in deference to it agreed to reaffirm Lebanon's 'Arab identity' and to make Israel's withdrawal a national priority. But as Khaddam reported to Asad on his return from Geneva, David Kimche, Israel's 'Mr Lebanon', had been lurking in the wings and the Lebanese Forces, Israel's proxies, had rejected the conference decisions. Meanwhile, on the ground in Beirut there was anything but harmony: kidnappings, skirmishings, bombardments between East and West, between Maronites and Druzes, between President Jumayil and his enemies continued unabated. Nevertheless Syria was undoubtedly winning, and Jumayil himself was expected in Damascus on 14 November to concede publicly that the accord he had signed with Israel on 17 May was null and void.

It was at this moment, on the eve of his hard-fought victory, that Asad fell ill, leaving everything in the balance. A deeply chagrined Khaddam had to telephone Jumayil and ask him to postpone his trip – in view of the Syrian president's 'appendicitis'. The excuse did not hold water for long, as the foreign press soon unearthed the fact that Asad's appendix had been removed some twenty years earlier.

Asad spent over two weeks in hospital before moving to a private villa in the Ghuta, the Damascus green belt, for a month's convalescence. Although his doctors had been unable to diagnose any definite complaint, he continued to feel very weak. The timing of his collapse, at the peak of the struggle with Israel and the United States, aroused suspicions among those responsible for his safety that he was perhaps the victim of some insidious attack. So for his stay in the country his entire personal staff – cooks, maids, nurses – was changed as were the furnishings and household objects around him. Inevitably his health continued to be the subject of much gossip. He was rumoured to be paralysed down one side, to have been shot in the chest by an assassin, to be incapacitated, to be finished. Syria's habitual secrecy fed the rumours, but in his cunning way Asad may have relished lying low to watch the ripples and confuse his opponents. In due course, to soothe domestic opinion, Syrian television showed him in conference on 27 November and three days later there was a brief somewhat contrived film clip of him opening a new bridge in Damascus.

Fear of a US plot

This picture of business as usual drew a veil not only over Asad's still uncertain health but also over the early rumblings of an internal power struggle.[3] No one had been more thunderstruck by Asad's illness than Rif'at, Lord Protector of the realm, who after three sleepless nights at the hospital looked more ravaged than Asad himself. From his sickbed Asad sent word to form a six-man committee to which he entrusted the day-to-day running of affairs: Khaddam (Foreign Minister), Ahmar (assistant secretary of the party's National Command), Tlas (Defence Minister), Shihabi (Chief of Staff), Kasm (Prime Minister), and Mashariqa (assistant secretary of the Regional Command). But Rif'at,

more senior than some, more powerful than any, was not included.

An event then occurred which would have been unimaginable had Asad been on his feet. Fearing that he was dying and alarmed at the changes his death might bring, the country's most powerful generals turned to Rif'at for leadership,[4] perhaps seeing him as the best champion of a system on which they had thrived for a decade and more. As Asad's brother he was a symbol of continuity; as head of the strongest strike force he was a pillar of the regime; he was a victor of the war against the Muslim Brothers, the worst internal danger they had all faced. Above all, Rif'at was the foremost baron in the state and could therefore be counted on to leave undisturbed the baronies and fiefs of others – the security agencies, armoured divisions, state enterprises, missile corps and the like. The last thing the generals wanted was to see the succession pass to the six government and party functionaries on the committee Asad had set up. In their eyes, the members of this committee were no more than talented executives, front men, not the underpinnings of the system which the field commanders and intelligence chiefs saw themselves to be. Appalled at the vacuum which threatened them, the generals now overturned Asad's arrangements.

At their instigation, Shihabi and Khaddam called on Rif'at at his house in Mezze to put it to him that a man of his importance could not be excluded at such a moment of crisis from the ruling councils of the country. Rif'at said that he must bow to the president's wishes, but he was soon persuaded. A full meeting of the Regional Command was then convened – just nineteen members in the absence of Asad himself and of his Information Minister, Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad, then dying of a brain tumour. It voted to substitute itself for Asad's six-man committee. This was a neat way of bringing Rif'at to the centre of affairs.

The success of these manoeuvres depended on Asad's continued incapacity. But he was getting better and when during his convalescence he heard what had happened, he was extremely displeased. Any deviation from unquestioning obedience aroused his suspicions. Summoning the top generals, he berated them for having departed from his express wishes and thus opened the door to unpredictable dangers. They had to be on full alert. Did they not see that the advancement of Rif'at was an American-Saudi plot to unseat him?

How had Asad reached this startling conclusion? In those anxious weeks his greatest worry was the war for Lebanon. While under treatment he had neglected to keep up with domestic affairs, but he had insisted on following the Lebanese crisis by telephone hour by hour. He noted that Yitzhak Shamir had returned from a visit to Washington in late November with a fistful of agreements ushering in (in Shamir's own words) 'a new era in Israeli-US relations'. There were to be joint American exercises with the IDF, US equipment was to be stored in Israel, the embargo on cluster bombs was to be lifted, military aid was to be increased. It appeared that Reagan and Shultz wished to compensate Israel for the aborted accord. At the same time, American accusations against Syria, notably from Caspar Weinberger, for its alleged role in the massacre of the marines became more explicit. When Syrian gunners shot down two US planes on 4 December and an American pilot was captured, Asad was certain that the United States would seek to punish him. His brother Rif'at seemed a possible instrument.

The younger brothers

The relationship between Asad and Rif'at retained something of the pattern of their childhood when across the gap of seven years the elder had compelled respect from the rebellious younger brother. Rif'at bore a noticeable resemblance to his brother, with the same strong heavy body and the same quizzical, sometimes mischievous expression, but their personalities were different: Asad serious and deliberate, Rif'at hedonistic and impulsive, altogether a more physical man but with a quick intelligence nonetheless. He laughed a great deal more than his brother, and in the tradition of Arab chiefs was generous to a fault. While Asad, chained to his desk, became totally absorbed in affairs of state and especially in foreign policy, Rif'at threw himself into building a dedicated following in his Defence Companies and in the country. He exercised arbitrary powers, enriched himself and his cronies, went on confidential missions to friends and enemies alike, and engaged in other murky ventures in the tangled world of Arab politics and business.

Unlike the many yes-men in Asad's entourage, Rif'at could genuinely claim to have shared power with his brother. In the party schism of 1966, the security force he commanded had arrested Amin al-Hafiz and Muhammad 'Umran. In 1969 he had defeated Salah Jadid's security chief, 'Abd al-Karim al-Jundi, paving the way for Asad's seizure of power. He had helped crush the Islamic insurrection in 1980–82, probably saving the regime. These were his credentials. But having triumphed over so many enemies, he began to write his own rules. He had a long arm extending to interests in many parts of

the country and across the mountains into Lebanon. His Defence Companies had become a highly mobile private army 55,000-strong, with its own armour, artillery, air defence, and a fleet of troop-carrying helicopters. It was more than a match for any other Syrian unit and the pay and privileges of its men aroused the envy of the rest of the army. Rif'at shared the taste for hunting, womanizing and playing the big shot of his friend and patron Prince 'Abdallah of Saudi Arabia, whose visits to Damascus were the occasion for all-night parties at which in early 1984 Tamara, an American belly dancer, was the star. Perhaps influenced to think dynastically by the Saudi model, Rif'at had married four wives and fathered seventeen children. He inspired loyalty and admiration in his followers, but outside his charmed circle was widely feared and resented. His haste to 'modernize' the country sometimes caused grave offence, as on the occasion in 1983 when his female paratroopers ripped the veils from women in the street, forcing Asad publicly to disown such excess.

Asad had often made use of Rif'at but, with no great confidence in his judgment, it is unlikely that he ever considered him a possible successor. Asad had dedicated his life to the defence of a certain political line on how the struggle with Israel should be conducted. He did not trust his brother with this heritage. He disliked (as did his discreet but influential wife) Rif'at's high living, scorned his weakness for the United States where Rif'at had bought a million-dollar home, and distrusted several of his foreign friendships including those with Yasir 'Arafat and with King Hasan of Morocco, whose covert contacts with Israel were notorious.

To sum up, Asad, believing himself threatened by Western enemies, by Israel and by moderate Arab states, came to see Rif'at as a chink in his armour. The brother who had once been useful, then necessary, then an embarrassment, had become a danger.

In fairness it is unlikely that Rif'at ever seriously aspired to rule in his brother's stead. Psychologically, he longed rather for his brother to recognize his importance – something he felt Asad had denied him from childhood – and of course he wished to live richly and exuberantly without let or hindrance as befitted a member of a ruling family. But essentially he wanted Asad to accept him as a partner, with a free hand on the home front.

However, on Asad's illness in November 1983 when the generals and the party command rallied behind him, Rif'at misinterpreted this gesture as signifying a total commitment to his leadership. Masterful by nature, he now behaved with all the assertiveness of an heir apparent. He started to press for the prime minister's resignation and

the formation of a new cabinet. Posters showing him in commanding pose and wearing paratrooper uniform suddenly appeared all over the capital.

He was quickly disabused. No sooner did Asad show signs of recovering than support for Rif'at faded. Taking their cue from Asad, the generals stopped believing that Rif'at could protect their interests and came to see him instead as a threat to the country and to themselves. Suspecting that he truly planned to supplant his brother and assume power, they set about putting obstacles in his way.

The job had to be done discreetly because Rif'at commanded a real army. His four elite brigades – three armoured and one mechanized, all within five miles of Damascus – controlled its approaches with tanks and artillery, whereas the forces of other generals were further out. A head-on challenge was out of the question. There was perhaps another reason for caution. The generals could not be sure how profound and enduring was Asad's animus against Rif'at. Was this a family tiff which would blow over, exposing anyone who rashly took sides? Was the leader putting his generals' loyalty to the test?

An early pointer that Asad meant business came when he disciplined another of his brothers, Jamil, who was known to be close to Rif'at. Mid-way in age between Hafiz and Rif'at, Jamil had become the effective boss of Latakia. An eloquent, ambitious, politically minded man, Jamil had qualified as a lawyer but did not practise. As the president's brother he was elected a member of the People's Assembly by a wide margin over other candidates. An instrument of his power was the *'Ali al-Murtada* association, founded in 1981, a political grouping behind a religious facade. Although it was not a structured movement Jamil may have intended it as a rival to the local Ba'th party, and it certainly provided him with a network of patronage stretching far beyond the town. Scores of buses bringing his supporters into Latakia from as far afield as the Jazira would line up outside his large house and garden where he kept a stable of fine Arab horses, mainly gifts from tribal chiefs. He would slaughter sheep for the visitors and make a grandiloquent speech. In mid-December 1983, as Asad recovered from his illness, the *Murtada* association was closed down on orders from Damascus, an indication that the president was reining in his family.

Containing Rif'at

The task of containing Rif'at fell to the generals. Most were men from 'Alawi peasant families whom Asad had placed – and kept for years –

in positions of great personal influence. Asad liked continuity. His habit was to leave a man in a job if he was satisfied with his performance. On security and intelligence matters, the covert side of the regime, his most trusted associates were 'Ali Duba, head of military intelligence, Muhammad al-Khuly, head of air force intelligence, and Fu'ad 'Absi, the civilian intelligence supremo whose powerful deputy in charge of security was Muhammad Nasif. Despite their titles there were no clear boundaries between these agencies, all three answering directly to Asad himself.

'Ali Duba, a tall, fair man from the village of Qurfays, shared some of Asad's traits: his sardonic humour, his unsocial tastes, his love of literature and his mix of ruthlessness and sentiment. When he was in his twenties his first-born son, to whom he was deeply attached, fell ill after developing an allergy. Rushed down the mountain to a doctor, the child was wrongly diagnosed as suffering from typhoid fever. He was given an injection and died. Crazed with grief Duba summoned his friends to gather threateningly round the doctor's clinic. 'What you do today', his brother cautioned him, 'will determine the sort of man you will be for the rest of your life.' Duba called off his men. Although he later fathered five other children, he was said never to show as much overt affection again.

Muhammad al-Khuly was more pleasure-loving than Duba and more visible in society, while the highly intelligent Muhammad Nasif was the most secretive of the lot, virtually lived in his office and was one of the very few people allowed to telephone Asad at any time. Apart from heading what was in effect the political police, he was one of Asad's key advisers on Shi'i affairs whether in Lebanon or Iran. He had been close to Musa al-Sadr and to Iranian revolutionary leaders such as Qotbzadeh and Tabataba'i, and frequently travelled from Damascus to Bonn and Switzerland, the poles of Iran's Western networks. These covert props of the regime contrasted with the visible trio publicly at the president's side: Foreign Minister Khaddam, Defence Minister Tlas and Information Minister Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad (although the last was soon to die).

Among the generals commanding key units, Rif'at's principal rival was 'Ali Haydar, head of the Special Forces, an elite formation of 10,000–15,000 shock troops who like the Defence Companies had played a prominent role in putting down the Islamic insurrection and who in 1982 had fought Israel in the Lebanon War. Haydar came from the village of Hillat 'Ara – one of the highest in the 'Alawi mountains, two hours' hard walking from the coast when he was a boy. Like Asad

he joined the Ba'th before enrolling at the Military Academy. Another of Rif'at's rivals was 'Adnan Makhluf, a cousin of Asad's wife, who commanded the 10,000-strong Presidential Guard. It was responsible for security around the presidential palace, in the Malki residential quarter where the top people lived, and in central Damascus as a whole. Makhluf had originally served in Rif'at's Defence Companies but after a quarrel had been given command of the Presidential Guard on the suggestion of his kinsman, Asad's brother-in-law Muhammad Makhluf. Yet another rival was the president's cousin, 'Adnan al-Asad, who commanded a smaller security force, the Struggle Companies.

In addition, four prominent regular army generals enjoyed Asad's special trust: Shafiq Fayadh and Ibrahim Safi, commanders of the Third and First armoured divisions, 'Ali Salih, head of the missile corps, and 'Ali 'Aslan, chief of operations and deputy chief of staff. Fayadh, a rough bear of a man, came from 'Ayn al-'Arus near Qurdaha, while Safi had made good from humble origins as the son of a landless sharecropper. 'Aslan, widely considered a sober man and one of the ablest members of the officer corps, had a distinguished record in the 1973 war and in the subsequent dramatic expansion of the armed forces. These were the generals who had first rallied round Rif'at, then turned against him, and who in early 1984 began manoeuvring to hold him in check.

Towards the end of December 1983 Asad felt well enough to start seeing foreign visitors again – but without managing to quell speculation that he was suffering from a terminal disease. Two French journalists from the weekly *Le Point*, who interviewed him on 20 December when he was still resting in the Ghuta, reported him as saying, 'I still feel young but my body and my heart don't permit me to stay as young as I would like' – a remark seized upon as evidence that he had suffered a heart attack. In early January 1984, back in Damascus, he handed over the captured US flyer, Lieutenant Goodman, to the Reverend Jesse Jackson, received Britain's Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, and argued with the American envoy Donald Rumsfeld against the background of gunfire from the Sixth Fleet. In the minds of all these visitors was the question: Was this a dying man?

At this point in the story, Asad's suspicions of foreign intrigue hardened. He became certain that his enemies were seeking to exploit his fragile health and the rift in the regime which foreign embassies were now reporting. His intelligence services were persuaded that Rif'at was being encouraged by King Hasan of Morocco and Prince

'Abdallah of Saudi Arabia – backed discreetly by Washington – to stage a coup timed to coincide with a show of force by the US fleet. Asad instructed 'Ali Duba to put Rif'at and his principal associates under surveillance, while 'Ali Haydar and Shafiq Fayadh were ordered to move troops and tanks into the capital to act as a counterweight to the Defence Companies. Beyond the immediate threat, Asad knew that, if he failed to control Rif'at, he might risk losing control of the other generals also.

On 23 February Prince 'Abdallah flew in to Damascus to a welcome from Rif'at's people which upstaged the formal greetings of Prime Minister Kasm. Had the prince arrived with a chequebook, diplomats speculated, to inaugurate a new regime? To forestall any such mischief, Asad ordered Chief of Staff Shihabi to relieve Rif'at's security aide, Colonel Salim Barakat, of his duties. Asad wanted him out in half an hour. Barakat appealed to Rif'at to protect him and Rif'at telephoned Shihabi to ask for forty-eight hours' grace. But Shihabi could only say that the president's orders were absolutely clear. Refusing to surrender his job, Barakat burst into 'Ali Duba's office brandishing a pistol. He was disarmed, roughed up and taken away. Some hours later Rif'at managed to reach Asad on the telephone.

'What have you done with my man Barakat?'

'I think we've executed him', Asad replied laconically.

'Why should you do that?'

'I gave the order to transfer him but he wouldn't go.'

Some while later Rif'at found Barakat in jail, secured his release and arranged a safer job for him in a university department.

The confrontation

Repeated attempts were made to defuse the crisis through negotiations. Rif'at sent his brother Jamil to intercede with Asad but the president's unforgiving answer was: 'I am your elder brother to whom you owe obedience. Don't forget that I am the one who made you all.' Asad continued to shorten the reins on Rif'at and the latter, now seriously alarmed, sought to protect what freedom he had left.

By 27 February 1984 Syria seemed on the verge of a bloodbath with both sides confronting each other angrily, guns at the ready. At strategic points in the capital, 'Ali Haydar's Special Forces in maroon berets faced Rif'at's Defence Companies in cinnamon berets, while Adnan Makhluf's Presidential Guard put on a show of force in the boulevards around the palace. At night some sporadic shooting was heard but there was no decisive clash of arms.

The irony was that this dangerous turmoil at home coincided with the sealing of victory in Lebanon: on 29 February President Amin Jumayil arrived at last in Damascus to announce his government's decision to abrogate the Israel-Lebanon accord of 17 May 1983. That same night, 29 February-1 March, the Regional Command met in emergency session to find a way out of the internal crisis.

The solution reached was expressed in the appointment, by presidential decree on 11 March, of three Vice-presidents – with Khaddam, Rif'at's enemy and a point of focus for the generals, heading the list. Next came Rif'at himself, named in the decree with no other rank or title save that of 'Doctor' (a reference to a doctorate he had been awarded by Moscow University for a thesis on class struggle in Syria thought to be the work of a Russian-speaking 'Alawi, Ahmad Dawud). The third Vice-president was Zahayr Mashariqa, Asad's assistant on the Regional Command.

Rif'at's promotion to vice-presidential rank was in fact a demotion, seeing that his duties were left unspecified and would now depend on the president's favour. Command of his Defence Companies passed by another presidential decree to Colonel Muhammad Ghanim. Rif'at could not contest his own removal from the job but, summoning his officers, he called on them to elect a new commander – whereupon they chose his son-in-law, Mu'in Nasif. The unfortunate Ghanim, caught between Asad's orders and Rif'at's counter-orders, stepped down.

The Kremlin (where Konstantin Chernenko had emerged as leader on Andropov's death on 10 February 1984) watched developments in Syria with alarm and a good deal of bewilderment. Was their friend Asad in real trouble just when he had seen off the US fleet? Anxious to forestall any violent change which might put at risk hard-won gains in Lebanon, the Russians sent Gaydar Aliyev, Politburo member and first deputy premier, to Damascus to find out at first hand what was going on. Bearing a warm message from Chernenko,[5] he arrived on 10 March and interviewed all the principals, Asad, Rif'at, Khaddam and the others.

But whatever mediatory role Aliyev may have played, the settlement announced on 11 March did not long survive: Asad was still bent on stripping Rif'at of power to rock the boat and Rif'at was equally determined not to be reduced to insignificance. The squeeze on him which had begun in the last weeks of 1983 continued into March 1984 with the transfer and arrest of several of his loyalists and even the death of some.

Rif'at came to feel he was himself in danger when he was told of an

anecdote Asad had related at a meeting of his commanders. During the Second World War the Germans had captured Stalin's son, then a young Red Army lieutenant, and proposed exchanging him for a German general held by the Russians. They threatened that if Stalin did not agree to the trade, the lad would be killed. But Stalin would not yield. 'So be it', he answered grimly – and wept. Rif'at's acid comment was: 'My brother's tears are dear to me. I don't want him to shed them on my account.' The Stalin story sounded ominously like a contract on his life.

On 30 March Rif'at could bear the tension no longer. With the noose tightening round his neck and perhaps egged on by sycophants and foreign friends, he ordered his Defence Companies to move in strength on Damascus – and seize power. His tanks drove right into the capital, outgunning the units of his rivals. A squadron of his T-72s took up position outside the General Intelligence headquarters at the Kafar Susa roundabout on the airport road from where they could shell the city. More armour occupied the gardens between the Sheraton Hotel and the new Guest Palace where minefields were also laid. Mechanised infantry surrounded the Meridien Hotel and the compound housing the bureaux of the party's Regional Command. Hastily deployed against this show of force were Shafiq Fayadh's tanks and, in the international fairground along the river, 'Ali Haydar's shock troops. Civilians in the battle zones were bundled out of their houses. It looked like civil war. Foreign military attachés, venturing cautiously on to roof-tops with binoculars, reported that shooting could break out at any moment.

Watching the unfolding drama, diplomats were puzzled by Asad's apparent slowness to react. He seemed almost inactive in the face of his brother's challenge. Had the two sides come to blows in the capital, the destruction would have been very great and the regime's image irreparably tarnished – that is, if it survived at all. All Asad's achievements in thirteen years of effort seemed at risk – and the battle for Lebanon lost after being so nearly won. Yet Asad did not move.

Gambling on his ability to control his brother even *in extremis*, Asad chose not to show his hand. As when he was preparing his counter-attack in Lebanon, he may have wanted to lull his enemies into a sense of false confidence. For this was not a crisis into which he had stumbled unawares, and the outcome was to demonstrate that his ability to master events was unimpaired. In weeks of cat-and-mouse manoeuvring, he had deliberately allowed Rif'at enough rope to hang himself before driving him into open sedition, no doubt to give himself ample justification for removing him altogether. Nor had Asad failed to take family precautions. The day before Rif'at's march on

Damascus, he had arranged for his ailing mother, then in her late eighties, to be flown down from Qurdaha to stay at Rif'at's home. He knew she still exercised a compelling influence over her youngest child. Compared to a player of Asad's astuteness, Rif'at was a political simpleton. The stage was set for the clash of wills.

With Damascus divided between armed camps seemingly on the brink of war, Asad put on full military uniform and, accompanied only by his eldest son Basil, drove without guards or escort through the empty streets to his brother's elaborately defended positions in and around the residential district of Mezze where both Rif'at's residence and the headquarters of his Defence Companies were located. Rif'at had placed tanks in outlying orchards and along the main thoroughfare and artillery on Mount Qasiun overlooking the city. On the way to challenge this concentration of strength, Asad stopped at the Kafar Susa roundabout which was manned by Rif'at's tanks and ordered the officer in charge to return to barracks.

At Rif'at's house in Mezze the brothers came at last face to face. 'You want to overthrow the regime?' Asad asked. 'Here I am. I *am* the regime.' For an hour they stormed at each other but, in his role of elder brother and with his mother in the house, Asad could not fail to win the contest. Rif'at chose to accept Asad's pledge that his interests and assets would be respected, deferring to him as he had so often done in their youth. His friends later reported that he judged the decision to give up the fight to have been the greatest single mistake of his life.

There was a further dimension to the struggle. The Russians intervened on Asad's side, throwing their weight behind him. Rif'at was a brave and daring man, but also a deeply emotional one. He simply could not bring himself to declare open war on a brother whom he admired and respected and whose approval he yearned for, however deeply he resented him.

After the confrontation, Asad toured Rif'at's units deployed in the Mezze area ordering them to stand down, amd in the next day or two, to the vast relief of the populace, the tanks and armed men disappeared from the streets of the capital. Asad's uncontested authority was manifestly restored.

The dénouement

Yet loose ends remained to be tied up. While Rif'at's principal power base was the Defence Companies, he had other centres of influence across the country. He was involved, for example, in numerous businesses and property developments where he had placed protégés as

managers, workers and guards. He was also an enthusiastic promoter of young people. One of his controversial schemes was, as has been mentioned, to draft young men and women into parachute training which earned them bonus points in their school-leaving examination, to the resentment of less athletic students. High marks enhanced their chance of a place in the much sought-after medical and engineering faculties. He adopted the romantic word *al-Fursan*, The Knights, as the title of a magazine he published, as the name of a housing estate in Mezze where he lodged some of his followers, and in general as a label for his ideal of energetic youth devoted to both self-improvement and the public good.

Perhaps his most ambitious cultural project was the League of Higher Graduates (*Rabitat al-kharijin al-'ulia*) to which at first only holders of second degrees were admitted but which was later widened to all graduates, although members were accepted only some years after leaving university and if they could point to some success in their careers. The League's fifteen branches round the country, assembling several thousand members, were forums where professional men and women discussed public affairs outside the constraints of the Ba'th party. Rif'at's rationale for drawing educated people into the League was Syria's need in competition with Israel to improve its intellectual life. He was keen on research centres, computers and language-teaching, and a number of such facilities were built under his patronage. But however public-spirited his efforts, his critics saw them as attempts to build a personal power base.

A couple of weeks after Rif'at's bruising encounter with Asad, his aides announced that a League rally would be held on 17 April, Syria's Independence Day, in the amphitheatre of Damascus University. But when Rif'at's public relations men sought permission to televise the occasion, they were denied use of the auditorium. The venue was then switched to the Officers' Club – whereupon the authorities cancelled the rally altogether. The order could have come only from Asad himself. Defiantly Rif'at then gave a lunch at the Sheraton Hotel for some five hundred guests – League members but also ministers and high officials – at which in a two-hour speech he recklessly attacked some of Asad's most fundamental policies.

Rif'at's primary motive was to defend himself against the charge of disloyalty: it was as if, over the heads of the lunch guests, he was speaking to the elder brother in the presidential palace.

> My brother doesn't seem to like me any more. When he sees me, he frowns. But I'm not an American agent, I'm not a Saudi agent, I've not plotted against my country. Have you forgotten that ten years ago I was called the 'Red officer'? [a reference to his role as a 'back channel' to the Soviets in the mid-1970s when Asad was negotiating with Kissinger]. When I contacted Prince 'Abdallah and the Saudis agreed to help us, it was because Syria needed money. I was working for Syria, for its economy and government. Why should I now be called a Saudi and American agent?

He could not avoid referring to the near catastrophe two weeks earlier when his tanks and those of 'Ali Haydar and Shafiq Fayadh trained their guns on each other across the squares and gardens of Damascus.

> Had I been foolish, I could have destroyed the whole city, but I love this place! My men have been here for eighteen years [a reference to the role his security force played in the intra-party clash of 1966]. The people are used to us, they like us, and now these commandos ['Ali Haydar's men] want to chase us out.

There was more to Rif'at's defence than personal apologetics. Although some saw him as a thug, Rif'at was also the champion of what amounted to a counter-culture. The ideas he promoted conjured up a wholly different vision of Syria and its place in the world from that of Asad. His League was an anti-party group in competition with the Ba'th and his followers were an anti-establishment elite, cleverer and more independent minded than the placemen and party bureaucrats of the regime.

The Sheraton lunch was Rif'at's most spectacular performance, but it was only the last of several. For months, at private and semi-private meetings, he had been developing an indictment of his brother's policies. Why was Syria spending so much in Lebanon when it needed investment at home? Was it wise to risk war with the United States and Europe and earn a reputation for terrorism into the bargain? Why not agree to simultaneous Israeli and Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon? Another favourite theme was Syria's over-dependence on the Soviet Union and on dubious Soviet guarantees. True, the Russians had vastly increased Syrian strength, but the pursuit of parity with Israel had its dangers. It could be achieved only if Syria were fully integrated into Soviet defence plans, but the price of such a full-blown military alliance with Moscow would be to rule out all independence of policy. Khaddam (a man Rif'at had no time for) boasted of having attracted one paw of the Soviet bear to Syrian soil. But what if the other three were to follow? Little Syria would then be tossed helplessly into the air.

On the Palestine question Rif'at made no secret of his opposition to Syria's support for Fatah dissidents such as Abu Nidal and Abu Musa in their war with 'Arafat. What was the sense of the feud with the PLO chairman? Why throw him out of Tripoli? Did he not have the right to be there, seeing that the Israelis were still in Tyre? And why was Syria so ferociously opposed to a Husayn-'Arafat deal which might one day recover much of the West Bank from an Israeli Labour government? Why not allow the Palestinians to proceed down this promising road?

Syria's alliance with Iran was another bone of contention. Rif'at had no love for Iraq's Saddam Husayn, but he rebelled against the close relationship with the Iranian mullahs whom he considered as reactionary and fanatical as the Islamic enemies Syria had fought at home. How could the regime pursue one policy in Hama and another in Tehran? Was the whole struggle against the Muslim Brothers nothing but a sham, without ideological commitment?

Rif'at was no less radical in questioning Syria's domestic orientation. 'We speak of freedom, but we are only free to eat and get married', he would complain. Presenting himself as an advocate of economic and political liberalization, he argued that it was good for Syrians to try to hoist themselves up to the standards of others, to enjoy consumer luxuries as well as the luxury of free speech. Syria, he charged, had deviated from the ideals and principles for which Asad had carried out his Corrective Movement of 1970. With ideas such as this, it was hardly surprising that, in Asad's eyes, Rif'at was guilty not just of heresy but of something close to treachery.

Most Syrians, it should be said, did not regard Rif'at as the liberal and humane pragmatist he made himself out to be. Rather, he was seen as a flagrant example of the abuse of power, of corruption, of loose living, of illicit and extravagant enrichment by such means as control of the Lebanese hashish trade.

On 15 May, in a development seemingly unconnected with the crisis, Asad recalled his ambassador from Morocco, ostensibly because King Hasan had played host at a congress of Moroccan Jews attended by an Israeli delegation which included nine members of the Knesset. Asad was certainly angered by Hasan's gesture of goodwill towards Israel at a time when Israeli troops still occupied large parts of Lebanon, but he must also have wanted to signal his displeasure at what he believed to be a Moroccan hand in Rif'at's rebellion. Rif'at considered Hasan one of the finest Arabs and counted him as a personal friend, while Asad viewed him as a deeply suspect figure whose contribution to Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977 he could not easily forgive.

The dénouement of the brothers' war was a classic example of the ringmaster's art: elegant, unhurried, and demonstrating Asad's control over his fractious underlings. On 28 May, with the help of the Kremlin, he despatched a plane-load of some seventy senior officers to Moscow for a cooling-off period. Among them was Rif'at. They were all banished with no assurance of when they would be allowed back save that it would depend on the will of their master. By expelling them all Asad underlined in the most public way that none of them was indispensable. He later related that some of these generals thought that if they were sent abroad the regime would collapse. 'Fear not for the regime, I told them, fear rather for yourselves.'[6] In the event, all but Rif'at were soon recalled to their duties. Getting rid of him, the richest and most powerful of them all, proved to the whole country that Asad was in control of the others. For face-saving reasons Rif'at's trip to the Soviet Union was described by Damascus Radio as a 'cordial working visit', and Chernenko helpfully granted him an audience on 1 June. But by the 5th Rif'at had set up house in exile in Geneva.

Epilogue

For months thereafter not a word about Rif'at appeared in the Syrian press, although the campaign continued to root out what remained of his influence. His once proud Defence Companies were reduced to a division-sized force about 20,000-strong: large numbers of men were demobilized or switched to other units such as 'Adnan Makhluf's Presidential Guard and 'Ali Haydar's Special Forces. Several of Rif'at's key officers were placed under arrest and a number were said to have been shot. Some civilian loyalists were forcibly evicted from the *Fursan* housing estate. Nothing was more wounding to a liege lord of Rif'at's calibre than to be unable to protect his own. Ba'th party members were instructed to quit the League of Higher Graduates, which withered in the absence of its exuberant patron. Rif'at owned properties all over Damascus which in his heyday, and to the inconvenience of local residents, were sealed off by roadblocks. These were now removed without fanfare, and people were able to enjoy walking up and down streets which had once been forbidden to them.

On 1 August 1984, in another turn of the screw, a handful of prominent friends of Rif'at had their membership of party institutions 'frozen'. This was the fate of Muhammad Haydar, a former deputy premier for economic affairs who had acquired vast

wealth, built himself a palatial home in Zabadani, a mountain resort near Damascus, and married off one of his daughters to one of Rif'at's sons. Another who fell from grace was the unlucky General Naji Jamil, who ironically had lost his job as air force chief in March 1978 for opposing Rif'at but who now suffered again for having made it up with him. In Latakia some of the properties of the once dominant Jamil al-Asad were confiscated. University places that September were won with *bona fide* marks alone, and some of Rif'at's young parachutists, deprived of their bonuses, had to spend an extra year at school.

Elliptical references to the brothers' war appeared in print and were much talked about. For example, a veteran Ba'thist and former academic, Hafiz al-Jamali wrote a fable in the party newspaper. At a moment of crisis the citizens of an imaginary city are ordered to extinguish all lights. An old woman lights a candle. She is arrested and sentenced to death. Yet at the moment of execution she prays God to grant long life to the ruler. 'If he dies', she explains, 'someone worse may come.' Asad, the fable seemed to say, was preferable to his brother. Another pointer to the *sotto voce* debate was a play by the well-known 'Alawi dramatist Sa'dallah Wannus about a power struggle between a king and his vizier. Entitled 'The Adventure of Slave Jabir's Head' (*Mughamarat ra's al-mamluk Jabir*), it was performed even before the crisis was over.

The ambiguity which surrounded Asad's relations with his brother was officially dispelled on 11 September when the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* published an interview with General Tlas, Asad's Defence Minister, in which he declared Rif'at to be 'permanently *persona non grata*'. The quarrel was at last out in the open.

Rif'at's banishment allowed Syrian society to perform an act of expiation. He left heaped with curses as if he were carrying away not just the sins of his Defence Companies and of his own indulgent lifestyle but also the abuses of the Ba'th revolution. In the public perception, his misdeeds highlighted Asad's virtues. Yet there was something paradoxical about a turbulent Third World country banishing its scapegoat to nice neutral Switzerland.

As befitted a *grand seigneur*, Rif'at was accompanied in Geneva by over a hundred aides and bodyguards, a costly entourage which, it is said, Colonel Qadhafi of Libya helped to finance to keep Rif'at out of Syria. Maintaining a private army in Swiss hotels would strain any purse, even one as deep as Rif'at's. In any event, there were problems with visas which required prolonged negotiation with the Swiss authorities. By September many of Rif'at's men had drifted home and he himself had moved to France with a reduced suite of guards,

servants, wives and children. But Damascus was clearly not happy to have this flamboyant and outspoken personage on the loose. When in July Foreign Minister Khaddam narrowly escaped death from a car-bomb, suspicious souls said that this was Rif'at's work. To Asad's great anger Rif'at was also reported to have met Yasir 'Arafat in Geneva. And when it was learned that Rif'at was planning to publish an anti-regime magazine in France and even to start a radio station, Damascus decided it was time to bring him home.

Rif'at still retained the title of vice-president and Asad himself never publicly condemned him, leaving in the public mind a continuing uncertainty about the real nature of their relations. On 10 November 1984 a presidential decree entrusted Rif'at with the supervision of national security – making him in theory the overlord of all his rivals, and on the 26th he returned to Damascus, called at the presidency, and knelt and kissed his brother's hand. But he had not been forgiven. His security job was a sham. He was prevented from renewing contact with his slimmed down Defence Companies and he was hemmed in everywhere he turned. It was painful for a man who had once enjoyed unfettered power to find himself so constrained.

The long-drawn-out struggle between the brothers was brought to its formal conclusion at the Eighth Regional Congress of the Ba'th party, held in Damascus from 5 to 20 January 1985, and attended by 780 delegates from across the country. Rif'at, as a member of the Regional Command, was present, but he was also in a sense in the dock and was exposed to a good deal of criticism. Everyone at the Congress knew how narrowly Syria had escaped fratricidal strife, and to whom they owed renewed serenity.

Party rules stipulated that the Congress elect a Central Committee – hitherto of seventy-five members, now expanded to ninety. These men in turn had the task of electing the new Regional Command, the highest pinnacle of party power. But at the Eighth Congress the rule book was laid aside: Asad, master of the external and the internal scene, victor of the struggle for Lebanon and of the succession crisis, was by acclamation awarded special powers. In recognition of his unchallenged personal pre-eminence the delegates entrusted him with the task of personally naming the ninety Central Committee members. It was a gesture of confidence in the political wizard who had checked the slide into civil war. Benignly, Asad sat through every session of the Congress, enjoying his apotheosis. Three weeks later, on 10 February 1985, he was elected president of Syria for a third seven-year term by 99.97 per cent of the voters.

Asad had triumphed, but in the crisis the institutions of his state had

made a poor showing. At the moment of danger he had to go down into the street himself and clear the tanks away. Checks, balances, the People's Assembly, the Popular Organizations, indeed the party itself with its extensive structure in both the country and the army, were all of no avail when ambitious generals threatened to shoot it out. In the end it was his personal authority and that alone which held the country together. He was the only pole holding up the tent. It was not a good augury for the future.

Meanwhile Rif'at took off again for Europe, his hopes of rehabilitation dashed. Asad's severity towards his brother did not abate. Although he was attached to Rif'at and owed him a lot, the defence of the political line to which he was committed overrode sentiment or family attachment. He remained convinced that his brother had, wittingly or not, been involved with foreign powers in an attempted coup against him and against his policies, and this he could not let pass.

In May 1986 Rif'at (who by this time had established himself in Paris in the splendour associated with exiled royalty) paid an unannounced visit to Britain. He was preceded by four armed bodyguards carrying Moroccan passports whom the British authorities quietly detained. Then two private planes landed at Heathrow carrying Rif'at, members of his family, retainers and security men, some forty people in all. Many of these too travelled on Moroccan passports. The British government allowed the party in, but a message was sent to the Syrian government through diplomatic channels requesting clarification of the visitors' status. Asad's response was swift: 'We expect Britain to behave correctly towards holders of valid Syrian passports. What Britain does with holders of other passports is no concern of ours.'

25

Forging a Nation

Like an Arab de Gaulle, imbued with national pride and steeped in diplomacy, Asad seemed not to be over-concerned with internal affairs. Standing up to Israel and other tussles with foreign powers, the main themes of this book, were the causes to which he devoted most of his waking hours. Internal Syrian affairs were if anything a base for external action, for in his mind the two were intimately connected: to be strong abroad he had to be strong at home. But strength on the home front could and did mean different things. On one level Asad felt that he had to be totally unchallenged: any substantial measure of democracy could be a source of weakness, citizens had to be drilled to cheer or to keep silent. On another level he recognized that his foreign policy required an underpinning of real strength, not just military but social and economic, and that this could be achieved only by the efforts of a lively and ambitious society. Throughout his rule he wrestled with the problem of reconciling obedience and dynamism.

In spite of the accent on foreign affairs, Asad and a quarter of a century of Ba'thist rule managed radically to transform Syrian life. The backward, indigent, exploited Syria of his youth was consigned to the past, and in its place emerged a rapidly modernizing, reasonably prosperous and well equipped society performing rather better than most developing countries of the Third World. Grave problems remained but the physical environment changed out of recognition, with roads, railways, dams, bridges and an unprecedented construction boom, and the quality of life was enhanced for the great majority of Syrians, especially the once neglected peasants of the countryside.

The beginnings of the social and political revolution predated Asad and even the Ba'th. In the late 1940s and 1950s the *ancien regime* of the notables came under attack, first from military putschists and homegrown ideological parties, then from Nasser who, as ruler of Syria for over three years from 1958, introduced land reform, central

14 Heikal, *Road to Ramadan*, p. 119; Ismail Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East* (London, 1983) p. 8.
15 For a detailed account of Egyptian–US relations in 1971–3 see Quandt, *Decade*, pp. 128–64.
16 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 196, 203, 296; Quandt, *Decade*, pp. 147, 153, 161–2.
17 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 220.
18 Ibid., p. 461.
19 Heikal, *Road to Ramadan*, p. 180.
22 Interview with President Asad, Damascus, May 1985.
21 Shazly, *Crossing of the Suez*, p. 31.
22 Heikal, *Road to Ramadan*, p. 22.
23 Interview with President Asad, Damascus, May 1985.
24 Shazly, *Crossing of the Suez*, p. 37.
25 The senior Western source for this information does not wish to be identified.
26 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 494, 500.
27 Ibid., p. 506.

Chapter 14 The October Illusion

1 Dupuy, *Elusive Victory*, p. 417.
2 Interview with As'ad Kamil Elyas, Damascus, 14 August 1984.
3 Dupuy, *Elusive Victory*, p. 433.
4 Rafael, *Destination Peace*, p. 290.
5 Lt-Gen. Mordechai Gur in Louis Williams (ed.), *Military Aspects of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Tel Aviv, 1975) p. 202.
6 Moshe Dayan, *Story of My Life* (London, 1976) p. 467.
7 Heikal, *Road to Ramadan*, pp. 217, 214.
8 Shazly, *Crossing of the Suez*, pp. 245–6.
9 Interview with President Asad, Damascus, May 1985.
10 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 481–3.
11 Dayan, *Story of My Life*, pp. 486–7.
12 Ibid., p. 474.1
13 Dupuy, *Elusive Victory*, p. 450.
14 Maj-Gen. Binyamin Peled, in Williams, *Military Aspects*, p. 242.
15 Louis Duclos, 'L'équilibre militaire israélo-arabe', *Maghreb Machrek*, 67 (1975) p. 42.
16 Abu Iyad, *Palestinien sans patrie*, p. 197.
17 Dayan, *Story of My Life*, p. 528.
18 Shazly, *Crossing of the Suez*, p. 248; Dupuy, *Elusive Victory* , p. 491; Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars* (London, 1982) p. 261.
19 Shazly, *Crossing of the Suez*, p. 248; Dupuy and Herzog suggest Egypt and Israel sent into battle up to 1,000 tanks each.
20 Shazly, *Crossing of the Suez*, p. 266.
21 Interview with President Asad, Damascus, May 1985.
22 Ibid.

23 Heikal, *Road to Ramadan*, p. 216.
24 Rabin, *Memoirs*, p. 114.
25 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 203. For his Middle East views, see ibid. pp. 195–205; for the evolution of his pro-Israeli policy, see Quandt, *Decade*, pp. 143–48, 159–64.
26 David Kochav, Economic Adviser, Israeli Ministry of Defence, in Williams *Military Aspects*, p. 183.
27 Quandt, *Decade*, pp. 102, 146–7.
28 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 625.
29 Ibid., p. 196.
30 Heikal, *Road to Ramadan*, pp. 207–8; Dupuy, *Elusive Victory*, p. 473; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 497; Abu Iyad, *Palestinien sans patrie*, pp. 196–7; Ismail Fahmy, *Negotiating for Peace in the Middle East* (London, 1983) pp. 25–6.
31 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 502.
32 Ibid., pp. 473, 493.
33 Ibid., p. 519.
34 Heikal, *Road to Ramadan*, p. 230.
35 Ibid., pp. 237–8.
36 Interview with As'ad Kamil Elyas, Damascus, 14 August 1984.
37 Heikal, *Road to Ramadan*, p. 238.
38 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 544.
39 Interview with President Asad, Damascus, May 1985.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 583.

Chapter 15 Duel with Henry Kissinger

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14 Raymond A. Hinnebusch, 'Class and State in Ba'thist Syria', paper delivered at a symposium on Syria at State University of New York at Binghamton, 22–23 April 1988.
15 Quoted in Michael Jenner, *Syria in View* (London, 1986) p. 12.
16 Interview with Dr 'Afif Bahnassi, Damascus, 12 May 1985.

Chapter 26 Dirty Tricks

1 Abba Eban, 'It's not like it was with Sadat', *Yediot Ahronot*, 3 December 1987, quoted in *Israel Press Briefs*, No. 56 (December 1987-January 1988) p. 5. The *New York Times Magazine* of 23 April 1984 reported that Husayn had held eleven secret meetings with Israeli leaders between 1967 and 1977.
2 See Claudia Wright in the *New Statesman*, 7 June 1985, on the 'Izzedin affair.
3 The expression is Gérard Chaliand's. See his 'Terrorisme "publicitaire", terrorisme "diplomatique"', *Le Monde*, 25–26 May 1986.
4 *al-Thawra*, 31 July 1985; *Tishrin*, 5 August 1985.
5 For an account of Shaykh Jawad Mughniya's life and political ideas see Chibli Mallat, *Shi'i Thought from the South of Lebanon* (Centre for Lebanese Studies, Oxford, 1988).
6 Interview with President Asad, Damascus, May 1985.
7 President Asad addressing a national conference of Syrian students, Damascus, 4 May 1985.
8 For examples of such accusations see the cover stories, 'The Terror Broker: Syria's Assad', *The Washington Times Insight* magazine, 23 September 1985, and 'Syria's President Assad: Master of Terror', *U.S. News and World Report*, 10 November 1986.
9 Benjamin Netanyahu, *Terrorism: How the West Can Win* (New York, 1986). The Institute was named after Netanyahu's brother who was killed leading the 1976 Entebbe rescue mission.
10 Ibid. pp. ix, 221.
11 Ibid. p. 23.
12 Ibid. p. 95.
13 Ibid. p. 204.
14 Ibid. p. 192.
15 Ibid. p. 36.
16 For Shaykh Muhammad Fadlallah's ideas see Mallat, *Shi'i Thought*; Martin Kramer, 'La morale de Hizbollah et sa logique', *Maghreb Machrek* 119, (January-March 1988) pp. 39–59.
17 *Washington Post*, 22 February 1987.
18 Woodward, *Veil*, pp. 395–7.
19 *Washington Post*, 17 April 1986.
20 Quoted in Shaul Bakhash, 'The Riddle of Terrorism', *New York Review of Books*, 27 September 1987.
21 *International Herald Tribune*, 27–28 February 1988.
22 Private communication from a US diplomatic source.
23 Interview with President Asad, Damascus, 18 March 1988.
24 BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, 16 and 28 May 1986.
25 *Washington Times*, 10 November 1986.
26 Israeli television, 30 December 1987, BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, 1 January 1988. Peres argued that, had Likud not killed his peace bid, the December 1987 uprising in the occupied territories would not have occurred.
27 Damascus Home Service, 26 May 1987, BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, 28 May 1987.

28 Interview with President Asad, Damascus, 18 March 1988.
29 Ian Black, *The Guardian*, 15 November 1986.
30 Interview with a very senior Jordanian source, Amman, 4 March 1988.
31 Interview with Dr 'Abd al-Ra'uf al-Kasm, Damascus, 13 March 1988.
32 Interview with President Asad, Damascus, 18 March 1988.
33 Charles Glass, 'Who Was Hindawi Working For?', *Spectator*, 1 November 1986.
34 Interview with President Asad, Damascus, 18 March 1988.
35 *Report of the President's Special Review Board*, 26 February 1987 (The Tower Report), quoted in *Chronology*, p. 68.
36 *New York Times*, 17 December 1986, *Washington Post*, 21 December 1986.
37 Graham Fuller to Director of Central Intelligence, 'Toward a Policy on Iran', 17 May 1985, quoted in *Chronology*, p. 103.
38 The Tower Report, pp. B-7, B-8.
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40 Ibid., p. B-9; Senate Select Committee on Intelligence: 'Report on Preliminary Inquiry', 29 January 1987, quoted in *Chronology*, p. 118.
41 *New York Times*, 25 December 1986; *Washington Post*, 27 December 1986 and 12 January 1987; Tower Report, quoted in *Chronology*, pp. 93, 99–100.
42 Tower Report, quoted in *Chronology*, p. 110.
43 Ibid., p. 111.
44 Ibid., pp. 122–3.
45 Ibid., pp. 129–30.
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47 *Washington Post*, 9 December 1986.
48 Tower Report, quoted in *Chronology*, p. 208.
49 Ibid., p. 211.
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51 Tower Report, quoted in *Chronology*, pp. 261–2.
52 Interview with Robert McFarlane, Washington, 30 July 1987.
53 Patrick Seale, 'The Banker and the $2.5 billion arms sting', *The Observer*, 27 April 1986. The case was dropped in the wake of the Irangate revelations.
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Chapter 27 Conclusions: the Balance Sheet

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