CHAPTER TWO
PRINCIPLE, PRACTICALITY AND POLICY-MAKING
IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1973 ARAB-ISRAELI WAR

Introduction
In this first case study, the subject is related only tangentially to Islam and terrorism. The case is instructive as an example of a complex foreign policy issue where, despite an acute awareness of locally relevant factors, a particular psychological bias appears to have impeded the consideration of possible alternative outcomes and related negotiation strategies that might have yielded more positive results for the United States. Deft dealing with the late Hafiz al-Asad of Syria required a great deal of insight into a daunting combination of issues: the roles of the superpowers, war, peace, terrorism, religion, secularism, nationalism, the status of minorities, as well as short and long term objectives, to give but a partial list. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger demonstrated an impressive command of these issues, but his approach to the negotiations appears to have reflected the distorting influence of the psychological bias, leading to results quite different than those he had hoped to achieve in his dealings with Asad in 1973 and 1974.

It is the natural and justifiable tendency of political scientists and historians writing on various epochs to utilize instances of major armed conflict as convenient markers to divide up their narrative. As the Middle East has traditionally been – for a variety of geographic, strategic, religious and economic reasons – an exceptionally “fertile” breeding ground of conflict, the history of this region especially lends itself to such demarcation. The many upheavals and vicissitudes that have characterized the region in recent generations make the twentieth, and now the twenty-first, centuries no exception to this rule. Specifically, Arab-Israeli history invariably is presented as a series of wars, each of which effects major changes in the course of events. While this presentation makes sense, it is important to recall that the aftereffects of hostilities are of
various types. Sometimes the shifts are obvious: one need only compare maps from June 4, 1967 to those amended after June 11. The massive territorial redistribution is immediately apparent.

The aftermath of the Arab-Israeli War of 1973 (also known as the Yom Kippur War, the October War and the Ramadan War) provides an example of a different category of war-created metamorphosis. Scrutinizing maps from before the war and following the signing of the separation of forces agreements, what is most evident is the similarity between them, especially as concerns the Syrian-Israeli border. While having resulted in far less territorial change than its 1967 predecessor, the October War nonetheless resulted in significant political change on the Arab-Israeli front and on the Arab-Arab front. The domestic situation of each of the participant states influenced the prosecution of the war and the way in which it was concluded. This relationship was two-sided, as the domestic situation itself was also heavily influenced by the war’s outcome. Some of these results can be traced to the designs and plans of specific leading players; others appear to have been unexpected, arising from the various dynamics of the war, the labyrinth of regional politics and the influence of the superpowers. In this chapter, we will examine Kissinger’s goals and assumptions in his efforts to negotiate an end to the October War, particularly as pertains to the Israeli-Syrian front.

It is our belief that Kissinger’s expectations about Syrian President Asad’s future behavior were, in fact, colored by a motivated bias, and, as a result, led the former to adopt an overly tolerant posture vis-à-vis his Syrian interlocutor. We will illustrate our argument by discussing some of the psychological factors that appear to have been at work here, by offering alternative assumptions and by placing Asad ourselves in light of these alternatives. We shall analyze what Asad hoped to achieve by going to war, and the extent to which he was
successful in meeting and even surpassing his goals, in part as a result of Kissinger’s approach to the situation.

We shall rely on Kissinger’s memoirs and secondary sources, both of which provide rich descriptions of Kissinger’s shuttles in the final months of 1973 and the first half of 1974. The memoirs are a particularly valuable resource in that Kissinger often shares the assumptions, goals and thought processes that informed his behavior when dealing with the parties to the conflict. It should be pointed out at the onset that Kissinger’s managing of the negotiations is but one of many independent variables that influenced the negotiations’ outcome. The focus here is on but one important aspect of what was an extraordinarily complex process.

Kissinger’s Shuttle

Among the many differences between the Syrian and Egyptian negotiations were those countries’ very different histories and cultures, roles in regional politics and relative political stability, as well as the difference between their territorial dispositions after the October War. These factors influenced the two countries’ approach to negotiations, and Kissinger’s attempts to mediate. Asad’s biographer, Patrick Seale, and others argue that Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat’s main goal in going to war was to jump-start his stalled diplomatic efforts toward making peace with Israel.\(^1\) Egypt was joined by Jordan in participating in the December 1973 Geneva Peace Conference while Asad stayed home, taking a much harder line. Asad’s ultimate October War “triumph” was not purely the result of his army’s efforts. Rather, it was the payoff of a combined military and diplomatic assault.

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The details of the arduous Israeli-Syrian negotiations are well known, and will not be repeated unnecessarily here. More important for the purposes of this essay are the ground rules, which will be described in greater detail below, and according to which these negotiations were conducted. Ground rules in the context of the negotiations are the bounds of the negotiations, the absolute musts and must-nots of the two sides. In retrospect, it appears that these rules were in large part dictated by Syria, and essentially accepted as gospel by Kissinger. In accepting Syrian dictates, we will argue, Kissinger reversed himself on previously stated policy stances, with the result of rewarding the Asad regime for its aggressiveness and lending it previously unknown credibility and standing in the Arab world and abroad. This would not be without cost to the United States in the decades that followed.

Did Syria succeed in recapturing the Golan Heights in 1973? One might think that the answer to this question would be straightforward. It is not. On October 7, the answer might have been affirmative, as by then the Syrian army had made significant territorial gains. By the time the cease fire was accepted on the 23rd, however, Israel had not only driven the Syrians back behind the “Purple Line,” which had separated them since 1967, but had also occupied an enclave along the road leading from the Golan to Damascus, putting the Syrian capital within artillery range. At this point it would seem that – territorially speaking – Syria had lost. But, the story does not end with the cease-fire either. Rather, to get the full answer, one must look to the separation of forces agreement, negotiated by Kissinger, and signed on May 31, 1974. According to its terms, Israel withdrew from the additional territory it occupied in October and from the area around and including the main Syrian Golan city of Quneitra, which had been occupied in

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1967. In terms of the total area of the Golan, this may seem inconsequential. However, Moshe Ma’oz makes a compelling argument that in the eyes of the Syrians, the gains made in the early hours of the war combined with the diplomatic redemption of Quneitra made for an important victory. This was symbolized most graphically by the fact that the Syrian flag was raised anew over Quneitra by Asad himself. This phenomenon also manifested itself on the Israeli-Egyptian front, where Egypt’s initial crossing of the Suez Canal, and maintenance of a bridgehead on its eastern side more than outweighed – in Egyptian minds – the Israeli counter-crossing and subsequent defeat of the Third Army. The Egyptians earned their foothold on the east bank in battle. How is it that the Syrians turned a territorial loss into victory?

Despite the October cease-fire, Syria waged a “war of attrition” against the (largely overextended) Israeli forces beyond the Purple Line until well into the spring of 1974. Against this background, Kissinger offers two somewhat contradictory takes on the desirability of a separation of forces. Reflecting on the outcome of the negotiations in his memoirs, he avers, “…our step-by-step strategy prevailed because in the end all sides – even radical Syria and the Soviet Union – each for its own reasons agreed that the tangled military dispositions inherited from the war were precarious, dangerous, and intolerable.” Yet, elsewhere in the same volume, he claims that “[n]either the compulsions nor the convictions existed on the Syrian front. Both Syria and Israel – certainly Israel – considered the military situation quite tolerable.” Ultimately, it appears that what motivated Kissinger’s efforts more than the situation on the ground in the

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1Ibid., 128-143.
4Ma’oz, Asad, 96.
Visitor’s to Egypt’s war museum note that the October War is presented as nothing short of victory.
6Kissinger, Years of Upheaval, 747.
7Ibid., 1045.
Golan and beyond was the desire to co-opt the radical Asad into the fold of negotiations for the sake of the nascent Egyptian-Israeli relationship, which had begun to show signs of promise. Kissinger foresaw and discussed the need for eventual, rapid, diplomatic progress as early as 1970, in the context of the Jordanian crisis (so-called “Black September”):

…I observed, “At some point, it will become apparent that time is not working for the Soviets. If they cannot get Arab territory back, the Arabs may well come to us.” Therefore, we should not yield to blackmail; we should not be panicked by radical rhetoric; patience could be our weapon. By the same token, once the breakthrough had occurred and the moderate Arabs had turned to us, we had to move decisively to produce diplomatic progress.⁸

In this case, “moving decisively” appears to have included bending over backwards to bring Asad on board. It was clear to Kissinger that Syria was not a friendly state. Syria had severed diplomatic relations with the United States in 1967, had been influential in the establishment of the 1973 oil embargo and had initiated the war against Israel in 1973. At the same time, one of the main themes throughout Kissinger’s memoirs is his acute awareness that the United States enjoyed unprecedented power in the Middle East following the wars of 1967 and 1973. Having lost two major wars relying on Soviet ideological, diplomatic and military support, Egypt and Syria were both realizing (Egypt more so) that salvation would not be found in Moscow. With the hostile Soviets and Syrians against the ropes, one might have expected Kissinger to take his own stern advice:

⁸ Kissinger, The White House Years, 559.
I had learned in Nixon’s first term that one must never relax pressures when the opponent is weakening. The right strategy is to combine two seemingly contradictory courses: to increase the pressure and to show a way out of the adversary’s growing dilemma.\(^9\)

Asad demanded Israeli withdrawals well beyond the October 6 line from the onset of negotiations, explaining that “beginning talks are a loss to us.”\(^10\) To be sure, Kissinger made it clear that Asad’s maximalist demands were a non-starter.\(^11\) However, he accepted, and came to champion, the notion that Israel should give up something beyond the October 6 line, going so far as to suggest that Israel withdraw from Quneitra,\(^12\) in order to get an agreement – any agreement – with Syria. He explained this stance – seemingly contrary to the increase in pressure on Syria that might have been expected, given his statement above – to the Israelis thus:

What Israel gets out of the Syrian negotiation is to have a radical Arab state sign a document with Israel. It is to remove the pressures on Egypt, which really only Syria can generate…. It gives the moderate Arabs… an opportunity to legitimize their course. And from then on every argument with the Syrians will not be a question of principle but a question of tactics.\(^13\)

\(^{9}\) Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 526. Emphasis in the original.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 784.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 958.

\(^{12}\) Kissinger takes credit for suggesting the parameters of the withdrawal to the Israelis, which were ultimately very close to those agreed upon: “I said briefly that in my estimate the final disengagement line would have to involve pulling back some two to four kilometers west of the prewar line and would have to return the town of Quneitra (held since 1967) to Syria.” Ibid., 965. Emphasis in the original.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 963-4.
It appears, then, that Kissinger felt forced to decide between the opportunity to advance the Egyptian track or risk its collapse by turning the screws on the Syrians. The crucial question here is whether these two tasks were in fact mutually exclusive, as presumed by Kissinger, or if he could have at once rewarded the Egyptians for their diplomatic overtures while punishing the Syrians for their ongoing belligerence. We posit that in believing that Asad’s participation in negotiations was necessarily a matter of principle rather than one of mere practicality, Kissinger fell victim to a specific type of psychological bias, which Paul K. Davis and John Arquilla have aptly termed “the tyranny of the best estimate,” and which they introduced in their analysis of another regional dictator, Saddam Hussein. That is, what Kissinger believed an agreement with Syria would have to mean to the Syrians was not only just one possible outcome (as we shall see, his prediction was not borne out by events), but it was the one that was most favorable to his own position. Davis and Arquilla’s remedy to this bias is to create multiple models of possible antagonist behavior. As noted in Chapter One, many counter-bias strategies begin with recognizing that biases exist and are at work. This self-awareness then facilitates the development of previously unentertained perspectives (i.e., multiple models). Here, as in the Davis and Arquilla study, the admittedly non-instinctive act of considering alternative scenarios might have led Kissinger to act – in this case, mediate the negotiations – differently.

Placing President Asad – Why Did He Choose War?
While a full, formal placement of Asad might begin with his birth to an ‘Alawite family near Latakia, it is more appropriate here to begin with the most germane features of his and his country’s intertwined histories that formed the context of his choice to go to war. Asad assumed absolute leadership in Syria in mid-

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14 Paul K. Davis and John Arquilla, *Deterring or Coercing Opponents in Crisis: Lessons from the War with Saddam Hussein* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991), 2. This bias is discussed further in Chapter Five.
November, 1970.  He inherited a Syria largely isolated from the rest of the Arab world, due to the radical, ideological policies of his ousted predecessor Salah Jadid. Six weeks before the “Corrective Revolution” that brought Asad to power, the Arab world suffered the loss of its most outspoken and charismatic nationalist leader, Gamal `Abd al-Nasser. The Egyptian president’s death left a power vacuum that both Sadat and Asad were eager to fill. While it is highly questionable whether a relatively young man like Asad – at the helm of a politically outcast Syria – could fill Nasser’s large shoes, at a minimum he took advantage of the circumstances to bring Syria back into the fold of inter-Arab politics. Just ten days after taking power, Asad flew to Cairo to meet with his Egyptian counterpart, and to announce Syria’s intention to join the Federation of Arab Republics. This was followed by the rapid restoration and improvement of relations with other Arab countries.

At the same time, Asad could not ignore the economic, sectarian and religious issues that threatened to undermine his hold on power at home. Thus, he set out on an ambitious plan to reform the Syrian economy, while placating and – perhaps more often – suppressing domestic opposition. That Asad would want to stabilize his country in order to consolidate his rule is certainly understandable. But what drove him to act so quickly and urgently in repairing Syria’s damaged relations with the other states of the region? The answer should be sought in the labyrinth of Arab international relations between the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973.

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15 The sources vary as to the exact date of Asad’s taking power. All agree that it was between the 12th and 16th of November.
16 Ma’oz, Asad, 37-40.
18 Ma’oz, Asad, 74-82; idem, Syria, 11-12.
The 1967 war left a particularly painful legacy to the defeated Arab states that participated in it. A common goal was newly discernible in the minds of the rulers of these states, clearer in its outlines than the general concept of “enmity to Israel” that preceded the war. The idea that the territories lost to Israel must be recovered by force became the overt position of leaders throughout the Middle East after 1967. Asad was – at least in his own mind – the leading proponent of this approach. This is in line with the position adopted by both the Ba‘th regime and Nasser as early as the summer of 1967. Indeed, it appears that this need to retrieve their lost possessions was stronger even than any sobering deterrent effect that the 1967 defeat might have carried with it.

As Yair Evron points out, there appears to have developed, then, interests unique to each of the states that lost territory in 1967, bound together by the common denominator of their territorial grievances. Practically speaking, the leaders’ desire to reverse the results of the 1967 war allowed them to put many of their other differences aside and focus on their common goal: “All other foreign policy objectives assumed lower priority compared with that one [the political and military campaign against Israel].” Asad himself articulated this concept at the Ba‘th congress of March, 1969:

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19 Behind the scenes, Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Jordan were also beginning to investigate diplomatic routes.
23 Ibid.; This phenomenon is also noted in Rabinovich, ”Continuity and Change,” 226.
I have repeatedly stressed the importance of Arab military coordination – notably among the Arab states which border with Israel – regardless of the differences and the contradictions in their political positions, as long as it would serve the armed struggle. 24

Hence, the unity among the Arab states inspired by the 1967 war lasted well after its six days had passed. In fact, this unity proved strong enough to last until – and even facilitate the execution of – the October War six years later.

We can conclude that Asad’s aforementioned efforts to reconcile Syria rapidly with other members of the Arab world following his accession to power, coupled with his tightening of relations with the Soviet Union were largely, though by no means exclusively, intended for the purpose of preparing for the next war with Israel. This war would allow the Arabs as a whole to regain what had been lost, and specifically allow Asad to reclaim the Golan Heights for Syria. Further, we can conclude, from both his words and his actions, that from an early stage, Asad saw war as the best, if not the only, means to achieve this goal. 25 Undoubtedly contributing to Asad’s commitment to war was the symbiotic relationship between war and both national and inter-Arab unity. Having established what is, in fact, a fairly obvious reason for going to war in 1973 (i.e., territorial redemption), we shall now examine other, perhaps more ideological motives that guided the president down the road to battle.

It is, of course, impossible to quantitatively measure to what degree any motive – or group of motives – influenced a historical protagonist to act in one way or another. That said, it does seem to be the case that the above-mentioned desire to reverse the results of the 1967 war was primarily what moved Asad to opt for

24 Quoted in Ma’oz, Asad, 38.
war in 1973. Secondary literature on the war, on Syria and on Asad invariably focuses mainly on this line of reasoning and, more often than not, presents it as almost axiomatic. However, some of these sources also posit a number of other, important driving forces, albeit in a more cursory manner.

Included among these reasons are Syrian popular and ideological identification with the Palestinians and their ongoing struggle with Israel; a sense of damaged Pan-Arab, Syrian and personal pride – a particularly sensitive issue with Ba’thist Asad; and the general, widely-held view that Zionism was nothing less than the antithesis of independent Arab political and cultural existence.

Finally, war would provide Asad with a medium to prove his commitment to Islam. Constantly aware of his ‘Alawite minority status amongst Syria’s Sunni majority, he took steps from an early stage to demonstrate that his being an ‘Alawite did not make him an apostate. Ma’oz lists a number of gestures made by Asad prior to the war, including the reformulation of the constitution to stipulate that the president must be a Muslim, the restoration of the presidential oath to include swearing by “Allahu Akbar,” his praying in public, an interview in which he “expressed his belief in Islam, which he views as the religion of love

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25 There has been some debate as to exactly when Asad decided to go to war. This, however, is irrelevant in the context of this essay. While the timing is, of course, important, we will focus on the question of “why,” rather than “when.”
27 Seale, Asad, 185-186; Ma’oz, Asad, 84.
28 Ibid., 85.
29 The ‘Alawis are a sect related to a branch of Shi’ism. Though some of their practices and beliefs are quite distinct from those of mainstream Sunni or Shi’ite Islam, some ‘Alawis have gone to great lengths to acquire a measure of Islamic sanction. ‘Alawis make up approximately 6% of the Syrian population. Cyril Glassé, “‘Alawi,” The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam (London: Stacey International, 1989), 30-1
30 This is reminiscent of Saddam Hussein’s adding of the same affirmation, which means “God is Greatest,” to the Iraqi flag prior to the Gulf War.
and justice,” and, perhaps most significantly, having his “authenticity” as a Muslim verified by both Sunni and Shi’i leaders.

It is clear that Asad had both practical/immediate and ideological/long-term factors influencing his choice to go to war. None of these were secret, and it appears that Kissinger was aware of most of them at the time of his dealings with the Syrian president. It should be noted that Asad’s motivation was similar to Sadat’s insofar as neither thought that the war would bring about the destruction of Israel. Both had more modest short-term goals. Where these goals differed, however, is that Sadat had hoped that the war (specifically, the establishment of an Egyptian presence on the east bank of the Suez Canal) would drive a diplomatic process that he had initiated before the war. Asad entertained no such diplomatic desire.

Convinced that any Syrian agreement would indicate a fundamental about-face and clearly recognizing that Asad had major concerns about his regime’s stability, Kissinger went to great lengths to allow Asad to strike a deal without undermining his position at home. Further, Kissinger understood very well the importance of territorial gains in driving Asad back to war. Consideration of alternative, though less favorable, motives behind a Syrian agreement – namely, that agreement was simply a way to make gains not made on the battlefield rather than an indication (however small) of Syrian acceptance of Israel – might have prompted Kissinger to reconsider the combination of factors lined up against Asad – being a member of a socio-religious minority, the fractious history of Syrian politics, his major roles in two failed wars that left thousands of Syrians dead or wounded – as well as the regime’s seemingly implacable hostility towards Israel, and, consistent with his own stated beliefs, conclude that perhaps

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this was precisely the time to pressure, rather than placate, Asad. In the context of the negotiations, Kissinger does mention that the Syrian military leadership – the source of a likely successor to Asad, had he fallen from power – was more moderate than its ideologically charged, civilian counterpart. This important fact appears to have been largely passed over as irrelevant, given the lofty expectations associated with what might be called the “Asad option.”

Finally, Kissinger might have observed that while Asad and Sadat had colluded for the purposes of war, they were in fact both vying for leadership of the post-Nasser Middle East. Their rivalry was made worse by the fact that Asad thought Sadat had betrayed him by not driving his forces further into the Sinai, which allowed the Israelis to divert their attention to Syria. Expectations of Syrian support for Egyptian peace moves and leadership would prove to be unrealistic in the extreme. We shall return to the long-term implications of Kissinger’s policy choice below.

**The War’s Immediate Results**

It is extremely difficult to know exactly which of the war’s results were planned – or at least hoped for – by Asad before the fighting, and which were the products of unexpected turns in the process of physical and verbal combat. The best we can do is make an educated guess based on his statements and behavioral trends in the period between his assumption of power and the war’s conclusion. It appears likely that the October War bore fruit for President Asad that he may not have known grew on the battlefield or in the negotiating room.

32 It is also worth noting that Nasser’s fall from grace followed his defeat in 1967.
33 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 780.
34 Egyptian forces had stopped advancing after establishing their foothold on the east side of the Suez Canal. It was felt that this was all that was needed to give the Egyptians the diplomatic leverage they sought. Further, it represented the extent of the Egyptians’ surface-to-air missile coverage. After Syrian pleading, the Egyptians did advance a bit further, with disastrous effect. Herzog, *War of Atonement*, 135, 205-7; Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 459-61.
We noted above the territorial disposition of forces that obtained at the end of the fighting in October. What about Asad’s ideological war goals? The October War did not solve the Palestinian problem. Even to the extent that it can be argued that the war led ultimately to peace negotiations between Israel and Egypt, it is significant that Israel’s eventual withdrawal from Sinai left Gaza’s residents “forgotten” under Israeli rule. Further, the words “Palestine” and “withdrawal” were conspicuously absent from U.N. Security Council resolution 338, which formed the diplomatic basis for the war’s end. Nor did the war destroy Israel, the existence of which Asad had categorically stated to be the antithesis of Arab well-being. As noted above, Asad and Arab military commanders did not even consider this to be a military objective. Thus, Asad’s ideological rejection of, and desire to eradicate Zionism was not – indeed, could not have been – satisfied by the hostilities’ outcome.

On the surface, it would appear that, save for the territorial gains brought by negotiation, the war failed in every respect. Or did it?

The Implications for Asad, the Middle East and the United States
Victory, it would seem, is largely in the eye of the beholder. While not ejecting Israeli forces from all of the Golan, Asad did succeed in bringing home the image of a winner. The victorious image brought home by the Syrians, and to a lesser extent the Egyptians, worked wonders in repairing the damaged pride of the Arabs as a whole, and of the individual participant states. That Jordan, Iraq, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states participated in the war – directly or

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35 Seale, *Asad*, 221. Syria begrudgingly accepted resolution 338 months after its passing.
indirectly – only added to the Pan-Arab flavor of the war effort, especially as this came after the lull in Pan-Arabism that followed the 1967 debacle.  

Asad’s balance between physical and political combat, and the willingness of Kissinger to play along, is ultimately what brought Quneitra – and honor – back to Syria. Asad was to employ this two-track method – a pen in one hand and a gun in the other – in his government’s relations with other states often in the decades that followed the war, most notably vis-à-vis Israel in Lebanon. It has been argued that no leader in the modern Middle East has better proved Clausewitz’s notion that “war is an extension of politics by other means,” though it just as often appeared as if Asad viewed diplomacy as war conducted by other means – another theme that we shall return to in the chapters that follow. Asad’s stubborn approach, and the perception of his having stood fast in the face of Israel and the United States earned him newfound respect as the leader of the Arab struggle against Israel. In this sense, he did indeed take over where Nasser had left off. This respect emanated from the other states in the region and from the superpowers themselves.

Kissinger had hoped to bring Syria into the fold of U.S. influence, drawing it away from the Soviet Union, and count it among the states building relations with Israel. At a minimum, he wanted to prevent the scuttling of the Israeli-Egyptian dialogue. This latter just barely was achieved. Egypt did eventually make peace with Israel. However, with strong Syrian influence, Egypt was completely ostracized in the Arab world and humiliated by being kicked out of the League of Arab States. President Sadat ultimately was assassinated by

36 Daniel Dishon, "Inter-Arab Relations," From June to October, 164-165; Hani A. Faris and As’ad Abdul Rahman, "Arab Unity," Middle East Crucible, 115.
37 Ma’oz, Syria, 13, 14-17.
38 Al-Ayoubi, "Strategies of the Fourth Campaign," 82.
39 Ma’oz, Syria, 96-7.
Egyptian militants who opposed, among other things, his dealings with Israel. Contrary to Kissinger’s belief, signing the agreement with Syria did not do much to “legitimize the course” of moderate Arab action.

The victory that Kissinger helped grant to Asad did not lead to a warming of relations between Syria and Israel either. On the contrary, it served to galvanize Asad’s position as a hard-line leader of those opposed to any normalization with Israel. Itamar Rabinovich points out that the disengagement agreement that Kissinger spent so much time and effort crafting was, in fact, never signed by Syria. Instead, the Syrians authorized an Egyptian general to sign for them. Indeed, until his death in the spring of 2000, Asad never deigned to speak directly to an Israeli leader. More than twenty-eight years after the October War, peace between these two rivals remains elusive. Kissinger’s claim that arguments with the Syrians “will not be a question of principle but a question of tactics” seems to have been rather off the mark. Once the Syrians had turned their defeat into victory, their utility from the even indirect engagement with Israel dropped to near zero. Syrian principles remained unassailable, perhaps until 18 years later, when the Madrid Conference was convened.

As to drawing Syria away from the Soviets and into the American sphere of influence, in the years following the war Syria, whose Ba’athist regime remained committed to Soviet-style command socialism and military doctrine, received unprecedented amounts of economic and military aid from the Soviet Union, which continued to flow until the latter’s collapse in 1989. Further, the

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40 Notably, Sadat was assassinated while reviewing a military parade on October 6, to commemorate the Egyptian victory in 1973.  
41 Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 964.  
43 As of this writing, Syrian-Israeli negotiations have been indefinitely suspended.  
emboldened, radical Syria championed anti-American causes in the Middle East, sponsoring Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist groups that attacked American targets. Among these is Hizbullah, which is responsible for the October 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy and U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut that together left over 300 Americans dead, and for the kidnapping of Americans in Lebanon throughout the 1980s. Syria remains one of seven countries on the Department of State’s list of states that sponsor terrorism, playing host to Hizbullah, which Syria continues to use instrumentally to pressure Israel, as well as to the ten Palestinian groups known collectively as the “Rejection Front,” which oppose violently any Israeli-Palestinian rapprochement.45

Aside from emerging an important regional power, and no less significantly for Asad, he had also earned the respect of his own citizens. In the three-and-a-half years between Asad’s rise to power and the concluding of the May 1974 agreement, he succeeded in dramatically changing both his personal stature and that of Syria in the Middle East. If he was not the same fiery motivator that Nasser was, nevertheless in the eyes of the Syrian people Asad proved himself the worthiest candidate to succeed the Egyptian leader. He achieved this domestic image improvement by taking steps to end Syria’s isolation under the Jadid regime, and by taking the lead in the military and diplomatic struggle against Israel.46

Bolstering this position, the war afforded Asad an invaluable opportunity to cultivate his image as a Muslim leader. The Ramadan War was clothed in an Islamic context, presented as a jihad. Asad spoke of his army as the “soldiers of

45 It should be noted that while providing them logistic and other support, Syria is careful not to allow these groups to launch any actions from Syrian territory. Office of the Secretary of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001 (Washington DC: U.S. Department of State, 2002), Internet: http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2001/html/10249.htm.
46 Ma’oz, Syria, 13-14; idem, Asad, 96-97.
Allah,” and their battle as the battle of al-Badr – referring to the early Islamic battle waged by Muhammad against the Meccan unbelievers in the month of Ramadan, 624 CE. By presenting himself as a Muslim leading his army against the Zionists, Asad succeeded in stripping his domestic Sunni opponents of much of their oppositional power. After the war, having brought home what many Syrians considered a victory, could Asad be accused of infidelity to the Islamic cause? The Islamic edge added to the war provided the majority of the Syrian public with yet another reason to unite around Asad. His efforts to garner domestic support before, during and after the war unquestionably were successful. While there continued to be some domestic antagonism to the regime, it was not until 1976 that Islamic opposition in Syria again became a factor with which Asad was forced to contend in a serious manner.

Asad, then, emerged from the October War stronger than ever before. The war provided him with a proving ground for both military and political leadership, and he rose to the challenge. That he was able to turn what was in many ways a crushing military defeat – ending with Damascus in range of Israeli artillery – into a political windfall and domestically-accepted victory attests both to his fortitude as a statesman, and to the credit, and ultimately, stature that Kissinger bestowed upon him. Asad took a huge gamble in going to war in 1973. Ma'oz goes so far as to speculate that he risked an Israeli nuclear response. In this respect, it would seem that his battle cry of “Martyrdom or victory!” was as relevant to himself as it was to the simple Syrian soldier. In the last analysis, he came out of the war with victory well in hand. Nothing furnishes better evidence of this than the fact that following decades of Syrian weakness and

\[\text{\cite{Ibid., 93.}}\]  
\[\text{\cite{Ibid., 83; 151-152.}}\]  
\[\text{\cite{Ibid., 90-91.}}\]  
\[\text{\cite{Interestingly, this cry was made again by al-Qa’idah forces near Tora Bora, Afghanistan as allied forces closed in on them.}}\]
instability – there were a dozen violent regime changes in Syria between 1945 and 1970 – he remained in power, ruling over a strong, comparatively stable Syria until his death more than 26 years after “correctively” ousting Salah Jadid.

With the multitude of factors that influence decision making in the strife-torn Middle East – competing religions, nationalisms, economic ideologies and claims to scarce natural resources, to name but a few – it should be clear that Kissinger’s handling of the disengagement negotiations was only one of many factors that influenced the war’s outcomes. One can only speculate how these outcomes might have changed if Kissinger had increased pressure on Syria. Would the next war have come sooner or not at all? Would Asad have lost power? Who would have replaced him? Would the (even imperfect) peace between Egypt and Israel been possible? Even with the benefit of hindsight it is impossible to definitively answer these questions. Two things are clear, however: Kissinger’s confident prediction of a Syrian slippery slope of reconciliation did not come to pass, and rather than legitimize the moderates through his participation, Asad’s post-negotiation enhanced status validated the approach of regional hard-liners.

Of course, even counter-bias strategies would not have provided Kissinger with a crystal ball allowing him to see the future of the Middle East. The implication here is not that Kissinger should have been any better at prediction. However, if the assumptions he details in his memoirs are a guide to his decision-making, it is safe to say that he could have benefited greatly from considering alternative motives behind Asad’s participation in the negotiations and related alternative possible outcomes, which could have let him better understand the precariousness of Asad’s position, and his then limited ability to cause regional

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52 Israel and Syria came to blows again in Lebanon in 1982.
trouble. Far from leading or nudging Asad and others down the path toward recognition and reconciliation, by making the negotiations appear to go in Syrian favor, Kissinger did much to reverse Asad’s poor fortune and to hearten those who advocated violent opposition to Israel and its United States backer. In so doing, Kissinger unwittingly strengthened a regime hostile to American interests for decades to come.

The passage of time apparently has led Kissinger to come to conclusions similar to those discussed above. Appearing on CNN shortly following the September 11 attacks, Wolf Blitzer asked Kissinger about the message the White House should give Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. His reply suggests a greater degree of skepticism regarding what could be perceived as the rewarding of violence:

I think symbolic meeting between Sharon and Arafat might be very useful. But for Israel to make concessions before a big success has been achieved against terrorism, will enable the terrorists to say that after they bombed New York and killed thousands of people, America exacted concessions which we wouldn't do before and would establish anti-American terrorism as the method for dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict.

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53 It bears mentioning that Syria could not have gone to war without Egypt.

54 “Special Edition: America’s New War; Domestic, International, Military, Economic Impact,” CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer, CNN, 23 September 2001. Transcript available at Internet: [http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0109/23/le.00.html](http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0109/23/le.00.html). Kissinger made a similar statement following the intense wave of suicide bombings in Israel in the spring of 2002: “It is important for us and it is important for the war against terrorism that the outcome, whatever it is, is not perceived as having been elicited from us by suicide bombing, and that one side has to make the territorial concession and the other side only recognizes that it exists but changes nothing else.” “Kissinger: Don’t Let Terror Take Credit for Mideast Peace,” CNN 5 April 2002, Internet: [http://www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/meast/04/05/kissinger.mideast/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/meast/04/05/kissinger.mideast/index.html).
Kissinger’s recommendations are all the more poignant given the sentiment of some Egyptians that September 11 was “their happiest moment since the war of 1973.” \(^{55}\) In the final chapter of this essay, we shall return to what else American decision-makers can do today to ensure that September 11 will not be remembered as a happy moment when hostile parties reflect on it and its implications 28 years from now.