

Syria

## PRESIDENT AL-ASAD TALKS WITH NEWSWEEK EDITOR

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[Text of interview granted by Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad to NEWSWEEK Chief Editor Arnaud de Borchgrave]

[Text] Question: The Israelis are saying that you failed to return the civilian population to Al-Qunaytirah, that Syria keeps violating the disengagement of forces agreement and that Syria is preparing for a new war. What is your answer to that?

Answer: Let us put straight a few facts. The return or nonreturn of the civilian population to Al-Qunaytirah town is one of our domestic affairs, and no one has the right to interfere in our domestic affairs. Furthermore, after signing the agreement but before the actual evacuation from Al-Qunaytirah, the Israelis blew up or leveled with bulldozers all the habitable houses in the town except about six houses. You have personally seen the demolished houses one after another. They did this by placing huge chains around these small houses and then had bulldozers pull down the houses. Al-Qunaytirah is now a demolished town. It is not 95 percent demolished, but 100 percent. Where are the civilians supposed to reside? Even if they can reside there, what are they supposed to live from? Al-Qunaytirah was an agricultural town, but now all the arable land remains occupied by the Israelis.

Question: Why do you not send civilian workers to rebuild Al-Qunaytirah town?

Answer: You have seen the situation there. If you were a Syrian civilian, would you want to work within a few hundred meters of the enemy weapons, or even within a few score meters, and sometimes only a few meters? Would you want to rebuild a new town before the Israelis restore its life blood, that is its agricultural land? This would be a futile attempt. The Israelis made sure before leaving Al-Qunaytirah that it would remain uninhabitable for a long time. Now they are accusing us of not rebuilding it. Let us be serious.

Question: Is there any violation of the disengagement of forces agreement on your part? What about the new road the Israelis say you have built to the Mount Hermon peak?

Answer: There is nothing in the agreement that says we cannot build a new road. But for your information I will say that we did not build a new road. The road about which Israel is speaking, we built, except for a few hundred meters, during the Golan war. The Israelis shelled the machinery which opened this road with thousands of bombs from their planes and artillery. The shelling did not prevent us from going on with the building of this road, and our machinery, including tanks, went up to a number of peaks on this mountain. All that we have done now is that the Tourism Ministry has converted the nature of this road from military to touristic. This ministry intends to set up tourist facilities in that area. Do you see how the Israelis distort the facts to suit their ends? We signed the disengagement of forces agreement with sincere intentions and with the very clear understanding that it constitutes a step toward complete withdrawal from our land in accordance with Security Council Resolution No 338. Since then, Rabin told you that even if Syria is willing to concede to Israel the kind of peace agreement it claims to want, Israel would still not withdraw from the Golan.

This is a flagrant violation of the spirit and letter of the disengagement of forces agreement and Security Council Resolution No 338. Thus the Israelis, as we see it, are intentionally trying to provoke Syria, hoping to find an excuse for dealing a so-called preemptive blow.

Question: The Israelis claim that there is a massive build-up of Soviet arms in Syria that has been speeded up in recent weeks and that you are stronger now than you were before the October war. Is this true?

Answer: The United States knows the situation perfectly well from satellite observation. Our wartime losses have indeed been compensated for by our Soviet friends, and I certainly hope that we are indeed stronger than before. However, I think you should see Israeli propaganda against Syria as an attempt to receive more and more arms from the United States, and also as an attempt to repolarize the Middle East situation, having the Soviets on one side and the Americans on the other. By waving this alleged Soviet threat, Israel is hoping to justify to its public and to the American public a return to the strategic theory of June 1967. I am convinced that your government can unmask Israel's game.

Question: Israel believes that you will ask the General Assembly to withdraw the UN Disengagement Observation Force, which is made up of 1,250 men, and that you will resume the war of attrition.

Answer: If Israel remains obdurate and refuses to give up what does not belong to it, it seems obvious to everyone, including a number of prominent, knowledgeable Americans, that the Middle East will be heading toward war once again. Do not forget, at any rate, that this is what the October war was all about, namely the liberation of the occupied Arab lands. The answer to the question of whether there will be another war is up to the leaders of Israel. There were those who expected, in the light of what we read and heard, that Rabin would present a new method and a new face of Israel to the Arabs. Now the matter is clear. It is no more than paint to conceal the same old bankrupt policies. Israel's leaders are trying to mobilize the friends of Israel in your country's Congress against any new withdrawal from the Arab lands. As we know, they were never as impudent in their interference in internal American affairs.

Question: Will the disengagement observation force remain for 6 months more after the termination of its first period which ends at the end of November?

Answer: The agreement stipulates that the mandate of the disengagement observation force is for 6 months. It may be renewed, subject to our consent. Let me remind you that the disengagement observation force is not here to police the cease-fire but to observe it.

Question: Will you give your consent for another mandate?

Answer: First, let us see if there is going to be progress.

Question: A few days ago, Rabin said that Israel will not make another withdrawal from the occupied lands without significant progress toward peace, and that it cannot accept the Arab conditions for settlement because this would mean the beginning of the end for Israel. Are we then facing a new dilemma?

Answer: Justice, on which the UN Charter is based--the charter that has been approved by all the world's peoples--stipulates the inadmissibility of the occupation of the territory of others and, consequently, provides for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied Arab territories.

Therefore, if such withdrawal as provided for by justice, which is confirmed by the UN Charter, would lead to the end of Israel, as Rabin claims, this means that Israel is founded on injustice. This is the only meaning that can be construed from Rabin's statements. All the world's peoples cannot accept or imagine that the number one official of any state would insist on contending that upholding justice and implementing the UN Charter would lead to the end of the state on behalf of which he speaks.

Can you imagine the world defending a state based on injustice?

Question: Some 3 months ago you had hopes that the disengagement agreement on which you negotiated with Dr Kissinger would be merely a first step leading to further withdrawals. In fact you interpreted the agreement as being a link to a subsequent stage. Do you feel that you have been cheated or misled?

Answer: I meant that we have signed the disengagement agreement with this understanding and this meaning. As for the realization of this understanding, it requires continuous efforts. Unless this understanding is realized, there will be a departure from the road leading to a just peace. In other words, the nonimplementation of complete withdrawal and the continued occupation of the land will not provide conditions conducive to peace but conditions conducive to war, the same conditions that existed before the October 1973 war.

Question: After comparing notes with Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia--which all recently sent senior officials to Washington--where do you think we stand now?

Answer: In the light of the sum total of contacts that have taken place, I cannot say specifically that there is anything new. The matter is still within the confines of exchange of views and general dialog between the parties concerned and the United States.

Question: How do you see the way out of the impasse?

Answer: Israel, unless it has secured a total U.S. stand on its side, has no choice but to move forward toward implementation of the Security Council resolution. In order to get out of the impasse, I do not expect the United States to bring pressure on Israel. It would suffice for Israel to realize that the United States will not apply pressure in its interest.

Question: Even if Israel is convinced to end its occupation of the West Bank, it does not seem that the Arabs are capable of agreeing among themselves on whether the responsibility of negotiating for the restoration of the land is that of King Husayn or the PLO. Do you have any suggestions?

Answer: Arab problems can be solved by the Arabs themselves. There is no complicated problem on which we cannot reach an agreement.

Question: But what is your opinion on the subject? Do you think that King Husayn should give up in favor of the PLO what he considers his responsibility as a representative of the Palestinians living in Jordan and let the PLO try to negotiate with the United States or Israel? Or should King Husayn be given a mandate by the Arab countries?

Answer: Concerning the Israeli aggression as a whole, the PLO has a role and King Husayn has a role. The definition of these roles is what is now being discussed between the parties concerned.

Question: If the road to the West Bank remained blocked because of this deadend, would you prefer the next step to take place in Sinai?

Answer: No, we are against any partial solutions. Partial solutions do not serve peace. This is a problem that must be dealt with as a whole and in a drastic manner so that peace will be achieved.