“Lessons Learned from U.S. Negotiations with Syria”

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FEATURING
Ambassador Frederic Hof
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Transcript by Rev.com
Ambassador Fred Hof is a diplomat in residence at Bard College. He has a long and distinguished government career as a foreign area officer of the U.S. Army, and as a diplomat working on resolving difficult territorial conflicts in the Levant—often working closely with former Senate majority leader George Mitchell. He's the author of the recently published book *Reaching the Heights: The Inside Story of a Secret Attempt to Reach a Syrian-Israeli Peace*. Fred, welcome to Babel.

Jon, it is wonderful to be with you. I’m an admirer of Babel, and I recommend it to my students all the time.

That’s very kind. Fred, what’s this secret attempt for Syrian Israeli peace that you write about in the book?

It is about an attempt I made between April 2009 and March 2011 to build a foundation for and ultimately broker peace between Syria and Israel. It was largely a, back-channel effort in the sense that it was not publicized—especially when it got to the point where the two relevant leaders, Bashar al-Assad and Benjamin Netanyahu, were personally engaged in this effort. On Netanyahu’s part, in particular, there was a strong disinclination for this to see the light of day—certainly in the preliminary stages. Therefore, it was a secret attempt at mediation. It was one that sadly came crashing down, beginning in the middle of March 2011 when the president of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, elected to use overwhelming deadly force against peaceful protestors. That convinced everybody else in the process that Assad was losing his legitimacy and really would not be in a position to speak for Syrians on matters of war and peace.

Now, I was surprised to learn from the book that this not only wasn’t your first time in Syria, but you had spent time as an American field service exchange student in Syria in 1964.

Yeah. This was like a million years ago.

What was Syria like in 1964, and when you went back to Syria as a professional diplomat, how did you feel the country had changed?

The country had changed enormously. Damascus had certainly changed physically. I can remember being in Syria around 1980 as a military officer; staying at the Sheraton Hotel, where there was a photo exhibit of Damascus during Ottoman times in the early 20th century. As I looked at that exhibit, it looked to me like the Damascus of 1964—where by 1980, Damascus was being transformed physically into a much more congested city. Also, in 1964, for me—with no background in the Middle East at all in the time—this was like a visit to the far side of Neptune. Syrian politics at the time were rather unstable. There was a Baathist government in power—to stretch the meaning of that phrase—but it was vulnerable, constantly, to a potential coup d’état. Coups were happening quite often in those days. The exchange students in Damascus the previous year, in 1963, had to lay low when a coup d’état took place. By the 21st century, Syria had acquired a system that was scientifically quite advanced in terms of repression. When Hafez al-Assad took over the country in 1970, he made it his business to wire the system in such a way that it would be very difficult to mount any kind of internal challenge to his rule. So I
would say, politically, that was the biggest change between 1964 and 2009, when I began this effort.

Jon Alterman: There's been a tendency in the last 30 years for people with close ties to Israel to be at senior levels of U.S. peacemaking efforts in the Middle East, and that was in contrast to the previous 40 years, where the opposite was the case. If you were to put together a dream team to pursue Arab-Israeli peace, what would it look like?

Frederic Hof: I think a dream team, trying to work on Syria-Israel peace, or Arab-Israel peace generally, has to consist of people who are genuinely empathetic to the demands and needs of both sides, and genuinely curious about the positions of both sides. The most effective diplomat that I ever witnessed in this respect was former secretary of State James Baker, under George H. W. Bush. Baker was intensely curious about the politics of his interlocutors as he put together various brand coalitions and a Madrid conference. His curiosity was insatiable, and I think that is what is needed. On the Israeli-Palestinian front, you're dealing with a situation where each side considers itself to be the righteous victim of the other side. Trying to mediate a situation like that without understanding, curiosity, empathy, or the willingness to do all the homework is asking for an exercise in total futility.

Jon Alterman: Now, one of the strong figures in the book and somebody you really clearly admire is Dennis Ross. He had a remarkable run in government, with senior positions running back to the Reagan administration. You worked closely with Dennis. First, why do you think he's been so successful? And second, what do you think his principal successes have been, and what do you think the most important misjudgments he's made have been?

Frederic Hof: My personal experience with Dennis was very positive. It started out on the Israeli-Palestinian front when George Mitchell asked me to team up with Dennis to oversee security related conversations. In other words, if there's going to be a two-state solution, what are the security implications? What has to be done to ensure that both sides feel secure? Who's going to run the airspace? What kind of arrangements are there going to be down in the Jordan Valley? What kind of security structure would Palestine have? I found Dennis to be an excellent interlocutor and co-chair of that effort, which I think was making some serious progress. On the Syria front, it was Dennis's relationship with the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at the time, John Kerry of Massachusetts, that gave me a way forward. Dennis, as you mentioned, has a long history in these efforts. I think he has acknowledged quite explicitly that his efforts on the Syria-Israel track in the 1990s fell short, and I think what he saw in 2010 was an opportunity to repair some of that because he knew that his strength was really on the Israeli side of the ledger. His relationships with Netanyahu and others. I think he saw that with my relationships with Syrian leaders, there could be a more balanced and effective attempt to get these parties together around a set of basic principles that could then evolve into an agreement and the agreement's implementation.

Jon Alterman: You mentioned your relationship with Syrian leaders. You had a number of conversations with Bashar al-Assad. What did you make of him, and what did you make of his turn in March 2011 that you referred to?
Frederic Hof: First, I have to say, Jon, there was nothing in my encounters with Bashar al-Assad, either in the company of George Mitchell or one-on-one, that gave me any indication or any clue that I was dealing with someone who would in the fullness of time, emerge as the premier war criminal—at least to date—of the 21st century. Assad was cordial. He was business-like, particularly in the presence of Mitchell. He gave the occasional impression of being eager to please. There was nothing in his performance that was the least bit indicative of what was to come. Saying that, none of us—not me, not Mitchell, not any member of my team—had any- had any illusion about the nature of the Syrian system. I did not consider Assad to be a reformer. There was no doubt about the nature of the regime over which he resided. I must say that when the violence began, I had some skepticism about who was actually responsible for what because Assad had given me every indication that he was completely serious about the peace mediation effort—that he wanted to see it brought to a successful conclusion. He knew that that successful conclusion would involve the gradual lifting of American economic sanctions—something he was very interested in. So, it surprised me when the violence persisted, thereby killing what I thought had been a very promising mediation effort.

Jon Alterman: One of the threads in your book is the role of history and that fact is often remembered very differently by two sides of a conflict. How did you research the history of Syria's borders, and did you find that your negotiating partners came to accept your history? As you point out in the book, there's a Syrian narrative about where the border is and there's an Israeli narrative, and then you have the “Fred Hof narrative.” How did those discussions go?

Frederic Hof: The fundamental Syrian objective was the restoration of all land lost to Israel in June 1967—all the way down to what the Syrians labeled the line of June 4, 1967. This is something that I researched. I remember attending a meeting at the Middle East Institute in 1998 or so, and people were throwing this term around. I asked a question, "what is meant by 'line of June 4, 1967?'" I really didn't get a satisfactory answer from the experts, so I decided to research it myself and make a real effort to describe in words and on a map a line that was not a boundary. It was not an armistice line. It was not even marked on the ground. It was a line that separated Israeli and Syrian forces down in the Jordan Valley, actually a bit west of the Golan Heights in the Jordan Valley, on the eve of war in 1967. Over time, I think that Prime Minister Netanyahu fully understood that complete Israeli withdrawal over time to this line was the price Israel was going to have to pay in order for Netanyahu to achieve his objective of complete Syrian strategic reorientation away from Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas. So, I think there was agreement by both sides that my depiction—which appeared in a 1999 book—of the line of June 4 was fundamentally correct. But, of course, there would be detailed, meter by meter surveying ultimately, if this process were to come to something looking like completion.

Jon Alterman: Mediation has been a theme through a lot of your career, and I'm wondering, how you were drawn to it. Was this something that, if met Fred Hof in 1964 in Damascus, I'd say, "The guy has the makings of a mediator;" or is it something that you fell into later in your career?
Frederic Hof: I don't think that there was anything in my career as a teenager that would've necessarily indicated any propensity toward mediation or diplomacy. In general, it's something I came to almost accidentally. When I was leaving the army, my former, superior in the Pentagon, former assistant secretary of Defense Richard Armitage, had been asked by Secretary of State Baker to mediate an Israeli-Jordanian dispute about a dam on the Yarmouk River. Jordan wanted to build a dam. The World Bank wanted to finance the dam. The problem was Israel had some fundamental objections to the dam being built. The World Bank had gone to Baker and said, "Can you help us out here?" Baker turned to Armitage and said, "Would you like to head a mediation team and see if we can sort this out?" And Armitage, knowing that I was retiring from the military, recruited me. I had actually written a paper on Arab Israeli water disputes as a grad student, so I became the so-called expert on the team. And this was my first attempt, and there were lots of lessons learned—as some in the category of how not to do it in the first experience.

Jon Alterman: I thought your final chapter was remarkably thoughtful and self-critical, and one of the things you're most self-critical about was about focusing too much on winning support in Jerusalem and Damascus and not enough on winning support in Washington.

Frederic Hof: Yes.

Jon Alterman: You've spent decades working in Washington. Why do you think Washington was such a hard target on this set of issues, and why hadn't you fully appreciated that?

Frederic Hof: I took at face value, President Obama's commitment to comprehensive Arab Israeli peace—which at least in the terms of the immediate neighborhood, meant, Israelis and Palestinians. That is the heart of the conflict. It meant Israel-Syria. It meant Israel-Lebanon. The president had spoken several times about it. I had no doubt, from Special Envoy George Mitchell that this was his mission. Almost all of the attention in terms of media and inter agency deliberations within the administration, went to Mitchell's effort to get Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas together to put together a two-state agreement. I was left free of a lot of inter-agency interference, rudder direction, and daily guidance. This worked very much to my advantage, until the very end when I had key meetings with Assad on February 28, 2011. Two evenings later, I had meetings with Benjamin Netanyahu and his team, and it looked as if we had engineered a breakthrough. It looked like we were going to be able, within a month's or six weeks' time, to convene the parties for proximity discussions, and perhaps direct discussions—likely in an eastern European capital. But what I was finding was that my reports of apparent success were met with silence in the White House, and then when the violence began in Syria, I strongly recommended that President Obama reach out to Assad telephonically and say, "Look, unless the violence stops, unless you have a way to put things back together diplomatically and stop the killing of civilians, this mediation is going to go away, and your prospects of recovering the Golan and associated territory may go away totally." Dennis Ross carried this recommendation in the White House, but that never happened. That recommendation was rejected, apparently for domestic, political reasons—the fear of being seen as reaching out to a dictator like Assad. And it began to occur to me, Jon, that I was really paying the price for the operational freedom I had in molding this mediation—that the White
Jon Alterman: House itself was not fully committed to it. Even in volume one of his splendid autobiography, Barack Obama, doesn't mention the Syrian mediation, and he conflates all of comprehensive peace into Israel-Palestine. So I came to the conclusion—and I tried to articulate it as accurately as I could in the book—that among my failures in this process was not making sure that the administration was just as committed as I was to making this happen. And if it wasn't, I would have stopped my efforts, and I would not have led the parties to believe that President Obama was vitally interested in making this happen.

But that's an important irony, that if you have freedom of action, you don't have support in Washington. If you have support in Washington, you don't really have freedom of action.

Fredric Hof: That was true, at least in that particular administration because what George Mitchell encountered increasingly during his tenure was a great deal of micromanagement from the inter-agency, and particularly in the White House staff. I think that the National Security Council (NSC) staff was unnecessarily activist in many of the details of what Mitchell was trying to do. You're right, this is the irony. I was spared all of that, but I paid the price because when the chips were down, we could not get the president to take a shot at preserving the mediation.

Jon Alterman: Fred Hof, author of Reaching for the Heights, thank you for joining us on Babel.

Fredric Hof: Jon, it’s been an honor to be with you.