

## Visiting the Destroyed Syrian City of Kuneitra

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In July of 1991 I went with a delegation of ten professors to Syria. We had been in Israel, Palestine, and Jordan but when the opportunity emerged to visit Syria we took it. This was a dream I could never have imagined, visiting a country so demonized in the U.S. This was months after Saddam Hussein had invaded Kuwait and driven its Croesses-rich ruling elite into exile. The US had put 500,000 soldiers into Saudi Arabia, crushed the Iraqis and driven them out of Kuwait. A dualfront uprising in Iraq had seize 80% of that country, only to be crushed. Then the US lead the parties of the Middle East conflict, including Israel's resistant Shamir government, into negotiations. The world was spinning, and we could not tell what was coming next. We were able to meet high Syrian officials, including Vice President Khaddam. It was eye-opening to say the least. But one of the greatest surprises was meeting two hundred Iranians.

It started when we visited the Golan province and the destroyed city of Kuneitra. If Syria was a surprise, the Golan was a shock. The Israeli military line is just forty miles from Damascus. All along the road are trenches designed to delay a tank attack. The area was a demilitarized zone policed by the UN so we had to get clearance to visit. We were accompanied by a Syrian General who was very agitated that he had to show identification to the UN officials to enter the zone. It was his own country, he said, and he had to get clearance from a foreigner.



Over 70% of the Golan is occupied by Israel but the eastern part, including the city of Kuneitra, is under Syrian control. In Kuneitra, you can look across the lovely valley and see the mountain where the Israelis have a fortune in electronic spying equipment. (Thank you, Uncle Sam). There are scores of antennae protruding from that complex. They say that from that mountain you can hear someone belch in Damascus. (They usually phrase it differently, but you get the point). I have seen this city from both sides. On the Israeli side signs say

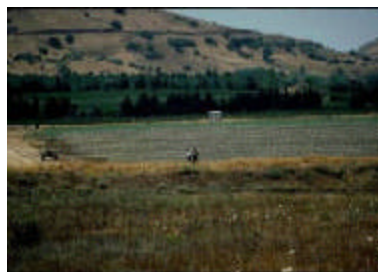


“Security zone. No photography.” On the Syrian side, there are no such signs so I took all the photographs I wanted. Down in the valley, we saw an Israeli farmer on a tractor working the rich

land. We also saw a family of Syrians “visiting” with their relatives on the Israeli side. They had binoculars and cardboard amplifiers to project their voices. At one point, a young woman shouted, “Grandma. Stand up. We can’t see you.” There was a barbed wire fence with signs that said in Arabic and English, “Danger. Mines.”

Kuneitra was the capital of the province before the Israelis occupied it in 1967. It had 50,000 people, several mosques, a large Orthodox church, a movie theater and a two-story hospital. Everyone fled or was expelled except for five Druze towns in the Israeli-occupied zone. The UN arrived in those places before the Israeli army and saved them. In the 1973 war, the Syrians had liberated almost all of the province. President Assad rushed into the city with a victory speech to show that the Syrians controlled it once again, but it was a short-lived victory. The tide turned and the Syrians were pushed out of almost the whole area. In the end, the Kissinger Disengagement Agreements of 1974 left the Syrians in control of 29% of the province but the Israelis still hold the high ground and are very near to Damascus .

The shocking thing about Kuneitra was not just that it was a ghost city, devoid of people, but that it had been destroyed. Every single building was damaged, most being crushed and unusable. The



Israelis are very defensive about this and have their own version of events. I once interviewed an Israeli spokesman who insisted that the city had been destroyed during the 1973 war, but this is not true. There had been fighting on the outskirts of the city, and some damage from shelling, but no fighting in the city itself. In fact, the local Israeli commanders had destroyed Kuneitra in 1974 just before the negotiated withdrawal. Apparently they feared that in another war the city could be a fortress. An ITN (British television) report

shows a reporter on top of the hospital with a camera. He was describing what was going to happen when the Israelis withdrew shortly. He said, "This is where the Israeli line is now, and here is where it will be after the withdrawal." As the camera panned across the city, the buildings were standing.

One of the professors in 1991 was a veteran. He said the damage was different from shelling or air strikes. Many homes had been exploded apart from within. Those had their roofs blown off and their walls expanded out. Others had been pushed down by bulldozers and were

heaps of rubble with their roofs intact. The church and mosque were still standing but they had



been seriously damaged. Inside, their marble floors were smashed. The church had been looted of its ornaments and sacramental objects. The movie theatre was destroyed.

The hospital was a special case, two-storied, a very nice structure. During their six-year occupation, the Israelis had used it for commando training, treating it as a building to be captured during urban combat. It was shot up on the outside and smashed up on the inside. In a later year,



when I led my own delegation to Syria, I was able to take my wife Jane along and she was fascinated by the hospital. As a physical therapist she could see the way it was set up.



“Here is where they would admit patients; here is where they would keep babies; here is the operating room.” To her, this was not a building but a travesty.

When I had seen this area from the Israeli side, the Egged tour guide had pointed across and said, “There is the old Kuneitra, which is empty, and there is the new Kuneitra, built after the Israeli pullout to house the people of old Kuneitra.” In fact, there is no new Kuneitra. The Kuneitra people mostly live in Damascus. The guide was probably pointing to the governor’s compound and the surrounding shops. During the negotiations in 1974 Kissinger had actually proposed that the Syrians repopulate the city but Assad said they could not do it so long as the Israelis held the surrounding terrain. Kuneitra is like a protrusion into Israeli-held positions. It is surrounded on three sides. Once when I was there with students, the Israelis fired a rocket from one side of their area to another, crossing over us. There was an enormous explosion. I think they were sending us a message. The Syrians told Kissinger, quite appropriately, that they would be putting people in danger if they moved them in. While we were there, we saw a family visiting from Damascus. It was a school break so mom and the kids came for a picnic. The mom was very nicely dressed and the kids had on their best play clothes. They put a picnic basket under the trees where their home had been and had lunch. They took a stroll down the empty streets. It was very poignant.

The first time I was there, I was walking around with another professor, a female who looked by age as if she could have been my wife. We were standing on top of the hospital when we saw a tourist bus drive up. It was a big bus, very fancy, air conditioned. We were quite surprised. When it opened we realized it was filled with Iranian tourists. They began to pour out, the men with beards, the women covered. Then another bus arrived, and another, and another.

Soon there were six. Each one had its own Imam. They were all over the place, a couple hundred of them. At a certain point, my colleague and I were on the ground walking around. We soon found ourselves surrounded by a circle of friendly but curious Iranians. One of them was a student who spoke English and was asking a host of



questions. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw an old man with one leg missing coming towards us double time on his crutches. Everyone seemed to be watching. This was a time when the U.S. and Iran were having very bad relations. I thought to myself, “this is not going to end well.” Not

only had the Americans funded Israel in almost every step it took against Syria, but I had some paranoid suspicion that we had somehow blown off that man's leg in some long-forgotten air strike that only he could remember. I had an image of him hitting me with his crutch and shouting things I did not understand. Then what was I going to do? But when he got to me he stopped, got a big smile on his face, pointed to his leg, and said, "Soldier." Now I had a new theory. This man had been called up in 1980 in his 50s at the start of the Iran-Iraq war, when things were going very badly for Iran. In my theory, he had been shelled on the first day and lost his leg. He hated Saddam Hussein and was delighted that we had kicked his backside in the recent war. It gave me a real insight that had not been so obvious before, that in the Gulf War, the Americans and the Iranians had been on the same side.

I also got another insight from the questions we were being asked. Based on the American media image of Iran as a place of passionate revolutionary mobilization, I had expected political questions – "Why do you support Israel and oppress the Palestinians?" Or "Why do you hate Muslims?" – but I was wrong. Some questions were about us ("Where do you live?" and "Where do you work?") but others were about American popular culture. The young man asked if I liked Michael Jackson, then the top music personality in the U.S. I said I did, but I preferred Madonna. I was not really a fan of pop music but I did like Madonna and thought that a reference to the sexy icon of the age would be funny. I got no rise from him, just a nod of acknowledgement. Then he said something that surprised me: "I want to go to America." "Why," I asked? "Because of television. Iranian television is boring. It is all religious programming. America has good television." So much for the clash of civilizations.

