

**THE
ISRAELI-SYRIAN
PEACE TALKS**

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1991-96 AND BEYOND**

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The views expressed in this book are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace.

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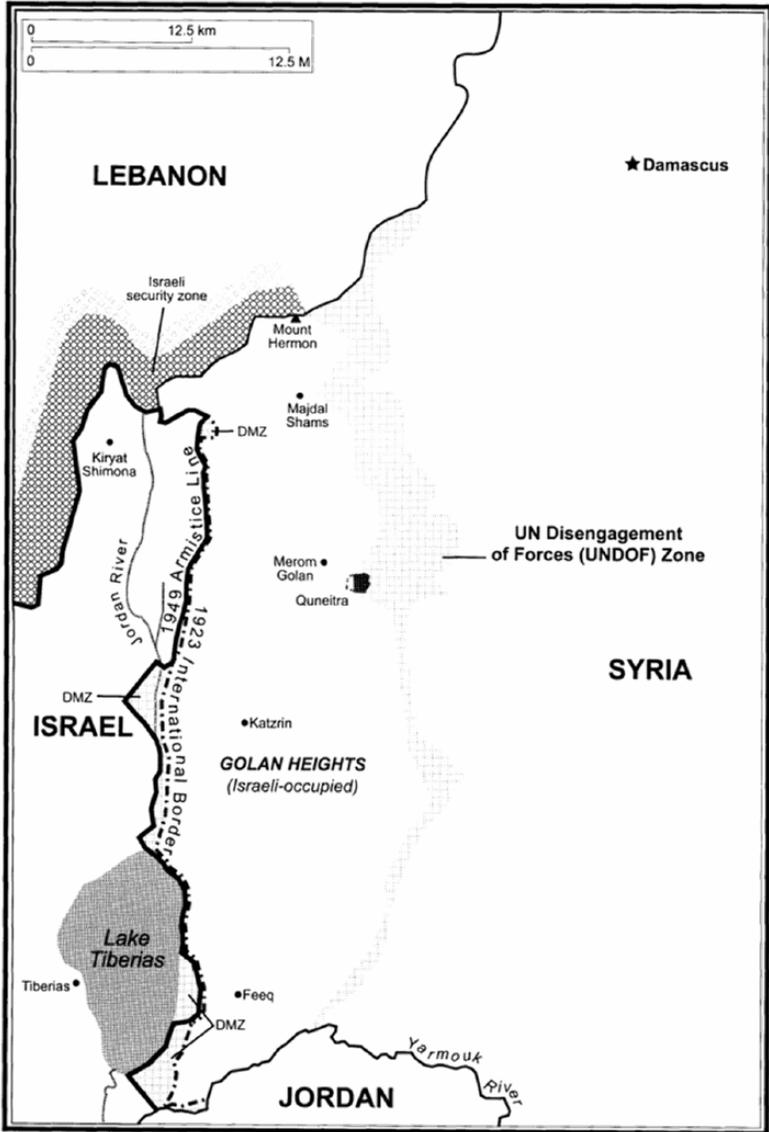
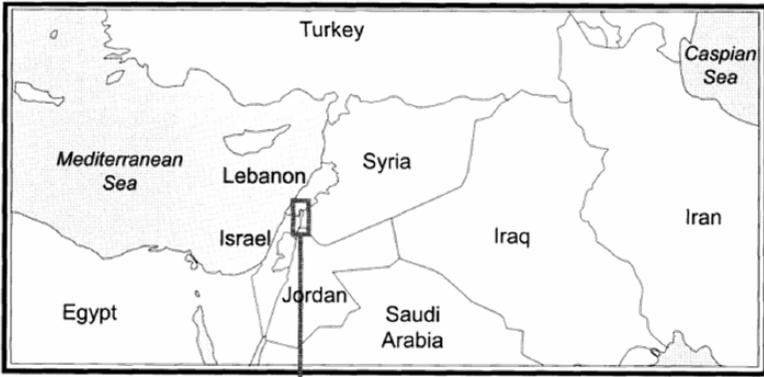
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*To the loving memory of my father,
James Macdonald Cobban, who throughout the
1980s traveled with me (and enjoyed meeting my
friends) in Israel, Syria, the United States, and
other countries dealt with in this book. He died,
aged 88, on April 19, 1999. He taught me many
things—not only the power of a well-turned pun,
but also the facts that peace is always worth
working hard for, and that a quest for justice
can come in many different forms.*

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Foreword

“What might the Middle East become,” Helena Cobban asks at the very beginning of this study, “if Syria and Israel . . . could reach a stable peace?” After three major conflicts and more than a half-century of a technical state of war between the two regional powers, the question seems oddly rhetorical. Yet as Cobban reveals in this timely work, Israel and Syria appeared to be very close to a peace agreement in 1996, only to see a historic opportunity dashed as a spate of Palestinian terrorist bombings and pressure on then-prime minister Shimon Peres from his own Labor Party forced Israel to suspend talks with Syria on a negotiated peace.

As its title indicates, this book is an examination of the successive rounds of peace talks between Israel and Syria that were facilitated and assisted by the United States between 1991 and 1996. The title’s “Beyond” reflects the notion that three years after the disappointing suspension of negotiations in 1996, the leaders of all three countries face the prospect of resuming the negotiations that could lead to not only a bilateral peace treaty between the two Middle East powers, but also to a comprehensive peace that has eluded the region for more than fifty years.

On May 17, 1999, Israeli voters replaced Benjamin Netanyahu with Ehud Barak as the country’s prime minister. Although the electorate’s discontent had centered largely on economic issues and a general mood for change, the desire for peace lay not so far beneath the surface of the main campaign issues. For years after his electoral defeat of Peres in

1996, Netanyahu seemed to be more adamant than his rightist Likud coalition's position in rejecting concessions for peace with neighboring Arab countries and with Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Indeed, Netanyahu's muscular rhetoric and intransigence on peace initiatives with Israel's neighbors—particularly his stalling on further withdrawals from territory in the West Bank, as called for in the Oslo Accords and the subsequent Wye River Agreements—suggested that any new approaches to end the enduring climate of tension would come only with a change in government.

By contrast, Barak's electoral platform was a welcome sign to those who had lauded the bold peace overtures of his mentor, former Labor prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin had been assassinated in 1995 by an Israeli extremist opposed to the peace process, but Barak expressed a firm commitment to carry on his mentor's search for peace: "If Yitzhak is looking down on us from where he may, he knows that we together will fulfill his legacy," said Barak in his election victory speech. "We need to strengthen our country's security by moving forward to peace agreements." Barak also signaled that he did not want to waste any time in picking up where the previous Labor government under Peres had left off. In response, there were messages and speeches from Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat welcoming Barak as the harbinger of progress on peace initiatives and agreements that remained dormant under Netanyahu. To solidify that image, Barak held highly visible meetings with Arafat and President Clinton in the months that followed the election. He also brought Peres into his newly formed government, assigning him the portfolio of "Minister of Regional Affairs."

Yet as Cobban notes, Barak has not always been an enthusiastic advocate of an Israeli-Syrian peace, at least with the assumptions and understandings that were taking shape during his service as military chief of staff and foreign minister, respectively, under Rabin and Peres. Assuming the mantle of prime minister, however, Barak at least has heightened the prospect of resuming negotiations with Syria, and there are powerful incentives for an Israeli premier to do so: With a historic settlement between the two countries, Israel would be able to end its occupation of southern Lebanon and claim a comprehensive, regional peace, capping its previous agreements with Egypt, the Palestinians, and Jordan.

While the initiative for a comprehensive Middle East peace, solidified by an Israeli-Syrian treaty, evinced the most progress during Rabin's and Peres's Labor governments, the prospects for such a regional peace were facilitated by another "regional" power—the United States. U.S. involvement in the Middle East has been an enduring component of American foreign policy ever since Israel's independence in 1948. For more than four decades after the British mandate in Palestine ended with Israel's war of independence, the region was perhaps the one most fraught with the dangers and risks of superpower competition: a mostly democratic Israel supported by the United States and surrounded by enclaves of Palestinian refugees and a ring of mostly hostile, autocratic Arab regimes bolstered by Soviet arms sales and influence. Subsequent wars would further change the region's political topography, pushing Israel to establish security buffers by occupying portions of contiguous Arab lands. In the Six Day War of 1967, Israel pushed deep into Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank of the Jordan River (including Jerusalem), and Syria's Golan Heights. With its invasion of Lebanon in 1982 to establish a security zone in that country's south, Israel had largely completed construction of a continuous military buffer in the ring of Arab states surrounding it.

Yet the push for that buffer also left an international climate of moral opprobrium, reflected in two UN Security Council Resolutions calling for Israel's withdrawal from occupied territories in exchange for recognition by the Arab states of Israel's right to exist within the pre-1967 borders. But unlike Kissinger's Middle East shuttle diplomacy under President Nixon, or the Carter administration's diplomatic midwifery of the peace between Israel and Egypt in the Camp David accords, President Bush and Secretary of State James A. Baker III took the initiative to achieve a *comprehensive* regional peace in the Middle East. Such was the assumption that led the region's players to Madrid in September 1991.

In this work, Cobban documents Rabin's and Peres's close reliance on the "good offices" provided by the Clinton administration to facilitate communication among the parties in their quest for an Israeli-Syrian peace. How Barak views the American role will obviously be a major factor in the progress of future talks, and Cobban also provides some valuable guidelines in the study's final chapter for maximizing the prospects for success among all actors in their quest for a comprehensive peace.

The political figures in the Middle East peace process all have major incentives for achieving a comprehensive settlement. As the most decorated officer in the Israeli Defense Forces, Ehud Barak possesses the same kind of authority exercised by another soldier-turned-statesman, Yitzhak Rabin. Thus Barak can make bold overtures on the peace front by relying on his credibility as a defender of Israel's fundamental security interests. In frail health, both Hafez al-Assad and Yasser Arafat want the historic mantle of statesman and peacemaker that would come with the return of Israeli-occupied lands to their respective peoples—as does Bill Clinton. Thus in mid-July 1999, Barak proposed concluding the negotiations with Syria before the 2000 elections in the United States and the presidential transition.

If the crucial question now is not if but when the two parties will return to the negotiating table, an equally weighty issue is whether Israeli and Syrian negotiators will pick up where they left off, using the same assumptions and understandings they had acquired during their years of discussions from 1991 to 1996. One problem in this regard is the ambiguity of what exactly was achieved throughout those five years. During Barak's postelection visit with President Clinton in Washington, Secretary of State Madeline Albright devoted her meeting with the Israeli leader to trying to reconcile differences over where the talks stood in 1996. For his part, Barak introduced a new dimension to the Syrian track—"normalization," requiring Syria to end its support to terrorist groups, renounce its official position that Israel is an enemy state, and open its borders.

Helena Cobban, a veteran reporter on the Middle East and columnist on world affairs for the *Christian Science Monitor*, has devoted a considerable portion of her career to studying the personalities and positions of the region's leaders in their fitful quest for peace. Drawing on the recent memoirs of Israeli negotiators, media reports, and her own interviews of major figures in the negotiations, Cobban brings to this study not only a journalist's keen eye for detail and ability to pose penetrating questions, but also a scholar's thorough grasp of regional—and American—politics to give readers a thorough appreciation for just how elusive a comprehensive Middle East peace can be. The shifting venues in her analytical narrative provide a panoramic view of all actors' hopes and concerns, and she demonstrates that progress on the Israeli-Syrian "track" of the regional peace talks (much more than the other

tracks) depends on a fragile and often frustrating calculus—in this case, involving geostrategic concerns, Israeli and U.S. domestic politics, the actions of hard-line Islamic organizations in south Lebanon, and Syria's relations with its immediate neighbors and other Islamic powers (notably, Iran).

This study, which was funded in part by the United States Institute of Peace's Grant Program, reflects the Institute's ongoing attention to the various dimensions of conflict in the Middle East. Our objective in sponsoring this work is to provide an extended narrative and examination of the negotiations' course to give analysts and negotiators of a possible new round of Israeli-Syrian peace talks a critical assessment of the approaches that worked—and those that did not—and the domestic and external factors that promoted—and those that hampered—progress on a historic peace agreement between the two countries.

The present work joins a long line of other books published by the Institute's Press that examines the complex interrelationships of the political, social, and ethnic components of the Middle East peace process, including former senior fellow Adnan Abu-Odeh's recently released *Jordanians, Palestinians, and the Hashemite Kingdom in the Middle East Peace Process*, Muhammad Faour's *The Arab World After Desert Storm*, and Mordechai Bar-On's *In Pursuit of Peace: A History of the Israeli Peace Movement*. In addition, the Institute has also examined the vital core of disputes between these peoples at the interpersonal level with the publication of former senior fellow John Wallach's *The Enemy Has a Face: The Seeds of Peace Experience*.

Richard H. Solomon
President
United States Institute of Peace

Preface

The work on this book was made possible through the financial support of two fine institutions: the United States Institute of Peace and the Foundation for Middle East Peace, both in Washington, D.C. The Middle East Institute, also in Washington, D.C., helped to administer both grants. I carried out most of my documentary research in the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia, with the help of the ever-cheerful library staff.

I am very grateful to the above-named institutions, and also to all those individuals in Syria, Israel, and Washington, D.C., who contributed their time and attention to helping push this project forward. Ambassador Walid Moalem, from Washington, and Ambassador Itamar Rabinovich, from Tel Aviv, were both generous in providing their own perspectives on the record of the 1991–96 talks. They both also helped me to set up important interviews with others in their national leaderships. I am particularly grateful for the time and attention that former premier Shimon Peres and Foreign Minister Farouq al-Sharaa gave to answering my questions.

Ambassador Dennis Ross and other serving and former U.S. State Department officials were gracious in their support, and in sharing their insights. Numerous other participants in the talks, and other specialists on the Israel-Syria relationship, also agreed to be interviewed for the project, on or off the record. Professor Moshe Ma'oz, and my fellow scribes Patrick Seale and Ze'ev Schiff, all shared their own expertise,

and gave me additional useful ideas on how to push the project further forward. Hosein Agha (from London) and Waddah al-Khatib (here in Charlottesville) gave particular help in the acquisition and translation of materials. I learned a lot from all the people who helped me on the project—those named here and in the text, and those not named—and I am extremely grateful to them.

After I had written a first draft of the text, I benefited greatly from the comments made by Ambassador Samuel W. Lewis, and—as I always do!—from those made by William B. Quandt.

In spite of all the help I have received, none of the above-mentioned individuals or institutions carries any responsibility for the judgments expressed in the text that follows, which must remain my own.

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