

Introduction

What might the Middle East become if Syria and Israel—which have been in a technical state of war since Israel’s founding as a modern state in 1948—could reach a stable peace? Obviously, such a transformation would radically improve the strategic situation of both these countries, but the conclusion of a peace agreement on this front could also have much broader positive ramifications throughout the region.

Given Syria’s dominant role in Lebanon, it is quite plausible to expect that a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement would be quickly followed by a Lebanese-Israeli peace agreement. That would enable both Lebanon and Israel to heal from the deep traumas caused by Israel’s twenty-one-year occupation of a strip of southern Lebanon. In addition, since Egypt and Jordan have already made their peace with Israel, this step would complete the “circle of peace” between Israel and all its neighboring states. For the first time in Israel’s modern history, there would no longer be any hostile national armies on its borders. Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians might well continue, but this conflict poses no military threat to Israel. Rather, the challenge it poses is the political one of finding a mode of coexistence between the two rival claimants to the Holy Land, and a decent answer to the long-standing claims of the Palestinian refugees. In a situation where Israel and all its Arab-state neighbors are at peace, it may well be easier to find constructive and generous political solutions to this challenge.

Beyond the immediate Israeli-Arab theater, there is also strong evidence that an Israeli peace with Syria might open other doors for Israel in terms of its relations with other major states in the Arab hinterland, particularly Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies. A Syrian-Israeli peace agreement thus could help transform the strategic situation of the entire Middle East, opening up huge new possibilities for regionwide economic and social development and simultaneously freeing up considerable resources that until now have been tied up in military investments.

Until 1991, people who envisioned what the Middle East might become after the cessation of the state of war between Israel and all the Arab states, or after the conclusion of a Syrian-Israeli peace, perhaps could be accused of daydreaming. But in October of that year, Israel, Syria, and all of Israel's other neighbors sat down together at a peace conference in Madrid, with the avowed aim of reaching final peace agreements among them. Three successive Israeli governments then engaged in bilateral peace talks with Syria. That unprecedented negotiation lasted fifty-two months. It did not get as far as concluding a final peace agreement between the two states, but under Israel's two Labor Party prime ministers of that era, the late Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, the two sides did break considerable new ground in the effort to build a lasting peace between them. They outlined the main topics that the peace agreement would need to cover. They reached explicit agreement on the aims and principles of a lasting security arrangement between them. They generally concurred on the content of the peace agreement in this sphere of security, as well as in the territorial sphere and in the normalization of political relations, future economic relations, and water—as well as on the linkages among these spheres and the phasing of the successive implementation stages. Among the participants in those talks, and their U.S. sponsors, there was a strong recognition by the end of those fifty-two months that they had achieved a good portion—possibly even considerably more than half—of the work of crafting a final peace agreement.

In March 1996, however, Israeli prime minister Peres abruptly suspended his team's participation in these talks. Shortly afterwards, he was defeated in a general election. His successor, the Likud Party's Benjamin Netanyahu, then refused to resume the peace talks at the point where Peres had suspended them. With Syrian president Hafez

al-Assad refusing to resume them at any other point, a three-year hiatus ensued.¹

As relations between the two countries settled back into a sulky state of no war- no peace, some voices were audible on both sides of the national divide, expressing renewed doubts as to whether a real peace could ever be concluded with the other side. Some of these people—analysts and politicians—tried to base their arguments on the failure of the 1991–96 negotiations: the “fact” that the other side had refused to take that opportunity to make peace just “proved,” these people argued, that they did not really want to make peace.

The present study, which is based on interviews with heads of negotiating teams and other actors and analysts in Israel, Syria, and the United States, and on an examination of the documentary record, draws a different conclusion from what happened between 1991 and 1996. Instead of intransigence, this study found a solid (if at times frustratingly slow) record of actual diplomatic progress, as well as an impressive and equally important record of peace-oriented learning on both sides of the national divide. This record placed both countries’ leaderships in an excellent position, once peace talks resume, to move toward a speedy and successful conclusion.

In May 1999, Netanyahu was defeated at the polls by Ehud Barak of the Labor-based “One Israel” bloc. Within weeks of Barak’s election—and even before he completed the complex, interparty negotiations needed to form his governing coalition—he was signaling a radical new readiness to reengage in the peace talks with Syria. In late June, he gave an interview to the veteran British Syrian-affairs specialist Patrick Seale, in which he stated that, “The only way to build a stable, comprehensive peace in the Middle East is through an agreement with Syria. That is the keystone of peace. My policy is to strengthen the security of Israel by putting an end to the conflict with Syria.” Israel’s premier-elect used a phrase that Assad himself had coined some years earlier; when he assured Seale that, “I am truly excited to see if there is a possibility to conclude a ‘Peace of the Brave’ with Syria.” And he sent Assad a bouquet of political compliments: “There is no doubt that President Assad has shaped the Syrian nation. His legacy is a strong, independent, self-confident Syria—a Syria which, I believe, is very important for the stability of the Middle East. I see Syria as a pillar opposite us on the other side of the region.”²

Within days, Seale was in Damascus, where Assad reciprocated Barak's compliments. "I have followed his career and his statements," Assad said of Barak. "He seems to be a strong and honest man. As the election results show, he evidently has wide support. It is clear that he wants to achieve peace with Syria. He is moving forward at a well-studied plan." Assad stressed in this interview that, "It is not a question of starting something new but, rather, now that Netanyahu has gone, of resuming on the basis of what was achieved before."³ Underscoring his determination to make a fresh start with Israel's new leader, Assad minimized the importance of the indirect contacts he had with Barak's predecessor: "From the moment Netanyahu was elected [in 1996], we realized it was hopeless. Nothing could be done with this man. Many people came to see us with offers of help. . . . After a while we said to them, 'Don't waste your time. It is pointless.'"⁴ Thus, in those weeks, Barak and Assad both seemed determined to put the Netanyahu-era stalemate behind them, and to approach the challenge of concluding a Syrian-Israeli peace with renewed commitment and activism.

It was not only with Netanyahu's legacy that Barak was signaling a clear break. His early actions and statements after he assumed office in July indicated that he was also breaking with key parts of the approaches that Rabin and Peres had used toward the Syrian track of the peace talks. Three aspects of Barak's approach, in particular, indicated a break with the precedents established by his Labor predecessors.

First, the speed and clarity with which he acted on this track in his early weeks marked a clear break with the ultracautious, ambiguous way that Rabin had approached the negotiations with Syria during his years as premier from 1992 through his assassination in late 1995—though it is notable that Barak's style did not mark a break with the approach Peres adopted after he succeeded Rabin to the premiership. This apparent discontinuity with the Rabin legacy, and continuity with that of Peres, was all the more striking since Barak was widely recognized as Rabin's chosen political protégé, and always recognized his huge political debt to Rabin.⁵

Second, Barak's stated intention of moving forward simultaneously on all tracks of the peace process marked a clear break with the approach used by both the former Labor prime ministers. At the joint press conference he gave with President Clinton at the end of his inaugural visit to Washington in July 1999, Barak spelled out that, "It is our intention

to move the process forward simultaneously on all tracks: bilateral [with] the Palestinians, the Syrians and the Lebanese, as well as the multilateral. We will leave no stone unturned in our efforts to reinvigorate the process.”⁶ Barak’s intention of proceeding simultaneously on all tracks can be seen as naturally linked to the desire for speed in concluding the talks. Rabin’s approach of refusing to engage in active negotiations on more than one track at a time was closely linked to the generally slow pace of his negotiations. (This is documented quite fully in chapters 2 through 4.) But moving forward simultaneously on all the key tracks of the talks was also something that Peres, whether through intention or inattention, failed to do during his six months in power. Numerous observers have noted that after Peres opted to give renewed attention to the Syrian track in early November 1995, and moved his main team of negotiators over to that track, he paid insufficient attention to the continued political and diplomatic needs of the Palestinian track—a failure that would cost him dearly in early 1996.

Third, the strong preference for a “command” style of leadership that Barak evinced during his early weeks in office was in clear contrast to Peres’s more collegial, more staff-driven approach to leadership—though it looked very similar to the leader-driven way that Rabin had run his side of the negotiations on the Syrian track during his time in office. During the first days after his inauguration, and even before he went to Washington, Barak made a dizzying round of personal visits to the leaders of all his Arab neighbors who would receive him: Egypt’s president Hosni Mubarak, the Palestinian Authority’s Yasser Arafat, and Jordan’s new King Abdullah II. He understood that President Assad was still not ready to receive a personal visit from the head of a state with which Syria was still in a formal state of war—but Barak had already transmitted clear leader-to-leader messages to Assad through Seale, and through at least one telephone call from President Clinton. (At the conclusion of the late-July summit between Barak and Clinton, the U.S. president indicated to reporters that presumably, by prior agreement with Barak, he would again call Assad to update him on the good news from the summit.) In all these actions, Barak was deliberately keeping out of the loop staff members of Israel’s foreign and other ministries who had produced such prodigious heaps of paperwork during previous rounds of the peace talks. He was apparently trying to create for himself the opportunity to take speedy and bold decisions in his

peace diplomacy with Syria—and unlike Rabin, he was also signaling that he intended to seize the opportunity thus offered.

The primary subject of the present study is the fifty-two-month period of the official talks on the Israeli-Syrian track between 1991 and 1996. This was one of four tracks of bilateral talks between Israel and its Arab neighbors with which it remained in a state of war that were set in motion by the Madrid Peace Conference of late October 1991. (The other tracks were with Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinians, with the last of these having some formal linkage, but little connection in practice, with the Jordanian track.)

As noted above, the talks on the Syrian track were unprecedented not only in their taking place, but also in their achievements. The meticulous records that both sides, and the U.S. sponsors, all kept of the points of agreement that had been reached by March 1996 have not yet been made public. Nevertheless, enough of the content of what the parties agreed on has been made public over the years—primarily through leaks within the chronically porous Israeli political elite, including one that was made spectacularly public in June 1995 by then-opposition leader Netanyahu—to indicate the degree of progress that the parties made in key parts of the negotiation. In addition, two of the three men who headed Israel's team throughout the years of these talks, Ambassadors Itamar Rabinovich and Uri Savir, have published memoirs of their participation in the talks on this track.⁷

These memoirs cover the periods when, respectively, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres were at the helm in Israel. Both authors were notably coy on the important point of how far these Israeli leaders were prepared to withdraw from the occupied Golan Heights in the context of getting satisfaction from Syria in all other areas, as well as on some other important points. Yet they do give a rich picture, from the Israeli point of view, of the tenor, general progress, and main issues discussed in the talks on the Syrian track, while Savir's book also gives some valuable details about the points of agreement reached during the ambitious negotiations that his team conducted during three rounds of talks with Syrian counterparts at the Wye Plantation, from December 1995 through March 1996.

From the Syrian side, the head of the country's negotiating team, Ambassador Walid al-Moalem, gave an unprecedented series of interviews to the *Journal of Palestine Studies* in late 1996, in which he

described many important aspects of the talks; these were published early the following year.⁸

The present study builds on these memoirs, as well as on broad documentary research and interviews that the author conducted with those three chief negotiators and with Syrian foreign minister Farouq al-Sharaa; former Israeli premier Shimon Peres; the head of the U.S. “peace team,” Ambassador Dennis Ross; and numerous other officials and analysts in Israel, Syria, and the United States.⁹ As described in chapter 8, the picture that emerged from this research was one of considerable “learning by doing” in the venture of peacebuilding on both sides of the Israeli-Syrian front line—as well as in Washington, D.C.

In the early months that followed the 1991 Madrid conference, Israel still had a Likud government in power. Throughout those months, Likud’s insistence on retaining all, or nearly all, of the territory in Golan that Israel had captured from Syria in 1967 made any peace agreement with Syria impossible. In June 1992, however, Israel’s voters brought a Labor government to power, under Prime Minister Rabin. That administration was considerably more favorably disposed than its predecessor to accept that the “land-for-peace” formula mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967 might be applied to the Golan front, as it had been (by an earlier Likud government) to the Sinai front with Egypt. However, despite Rabin’s theoretical readiness to entertain a land-for-peace approach with Syria, and despite the considerable understanding he had gained throughout preceding decades of the nuances in Israel’s tricky power balance with Syria, he was still not naturally inclined to make any bold or speedy moves on the Syrian track.¹⁰ Nevertheless, by proceeding at a deliberate and measured pace in negotiations with a Syrian leader who was by nature similarly cautious and disinclined to tip his hand, Rabin was able to make substantive progress in the negotiation, and to learn considerably more about the particular sensitivities of his interlocutor and about the broad outlines of what would be possible within any future peace agreement with Syria. Indeed, shortly before his untimely death in 1995, Rabin gave a long television interview in which he revealed a sensitive and realistic understanding of the need for a radical reframing of Israeli attitudes toward Syria, and of the very real benefits that cooperation with Syria could bring to Israel.¹¹

The bulk of the present study (chapters 4 through 7) is devoted to the period of negotiations from May 1995 through May 1996. That

period started with the successful conclusion (after strong American mediation) of an agreement between the two sides on language for a text concerning the "Aims and Principles of the Security Arrangement." The further progress that the agreement allowed seemed near when the two countries' chiefs of staff met at the end of June 1995 to hold detailed talks on the basis of the agreed text. But rising suspicions inside Israel—fueled by, among other things, Netanyahu's leaking of key army documents—then helped persuade Rabin to put the talks on the back burner, where they still languished when he was killed by an Israeli anti-peace militant four months later.

Rabin was succeeded by his foreign minister and longtime rival for Labor Party leadership, Shimon Peres. There are some indications that when Rabin had put the peace talks with the Syrians on the back burner in late summer 1995, he did so with some thought of holding early elections and then returning to the Syrian track with a renewed mandate for peace. But within days after Rabin was killed, Peres decided to try to reverse the order of these events: He wanted to light a new fire of urgency under the Syrian track and try to bring the talks to a successful conclusion before, rather than after, launching the required election campaign.

It was a bold decision, and one that Peres presumably made on the basis of a full review of what Rabin had already achieved on the Syrian track. Peres also sent urgent messages to Damascus through the United States to ensure that Assad was prepared to join him in the new policy of, as Peres and his advisers put it, "flying high and fast" toward a peace agreement. It is important to note that, in a clear break with the cautious and incrementalist *modus operandi* that Assad had adopted in the talks until then, he responded very positively to the bold invitation he received from Peres in late 1995.

During the two-and-a-half rounds of intensive, multi-issue talks that the two negotiating teams held at Maryland's Wye Plantation from late December 1995 through early March 1996, the Syrians showed themselves ready to agree to an unprecedentedly broad range of measures in the realms of security arrangements, political normalization, and economic cooperation with Israel—provided that, as they believed the clear trade-off to be, Israel would withdraw its forces to their pre-June 1967 lines. Indeed, through the constructive way that his negotiators performed at Wye, Assad was showing clearly for the first time that he was prepared to proceed to a final peace agreement with Israel even before

the Palestinians arrived anywhere close to one, and also that he was prepared for the first time to consider very creative interpretations of Syria's long-standing demands for "balance, reciprocity, and equality" in the design of postpeace security arrangements with Israel. At this negotiation, the U.S. "hosts" played a constructive role as "full participants" in the discussions.

Despite the good intentions of all three parties, Peres's hopes for rapid completion of this negotiation were not crowned with success. Instead, in a series of events reminiscent of a Shakespearean tragedy, Palestinian hard-liners opposed to the Oslo Accords detonated a series of terrorist bombs against primarily civilian targets in Israel in early 1996. The pressure started mounting on Peres from colleagues inside his own party and government—including, notably, then-foreign minister Ehud Barak—to move up the date of elections, deprioritize the Syrian talks once more, and then suspend Israel's participation in the talks completely. On March 4, 1996, this was what Peres finally decided to do.

The weeks that followed Peres's pullout from the talks saw a further dizzying series of developments in the Israeli-Syrian relationship. If Peres had invited Assad to "fly high and fast" toward peace with him in late 1995, after March 4 the relationship between their two governments began to deteriorate rapidly. In a bid to shore up Peres's political position at home, he and the U.S. organized an international conference aimed at demonstrating world support for Israel's fight against terrorism. Unable to do much more to crack down on the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, Peres instead sought to demonstrate his antiterrorist bona fides to Israeli voters by launching yet another in the series of broad assaults against Lebanon that Israel had mounted over the years. Since no reassurance to the contrary came to Damascus—from the United States or anyone else—the Syrians concluded that both these actions were aimed directly against them. It did not help matters that their northern neighbor Turkey chose March 1996 to reveal the existence of a hitherto secret agreement on military cooperation with Israel. Then, in the midst of Israel's massive bombardment of Lebanon in mid-April, an Israeli artillery unit mistakenly targeted a refugee shelter in Kafr Qana, and killed over one hundred civilians of all ages. Syrian television, which just weeks earlier had been airing cautiously optimistic commentaries about the prospects for an imminent peace with Israel, then described Peres as "a killer of children." (Israel's rhetoric against

Syria also had made an intemperate shift during that period.) Peres's decision to launch the April offensive against Lebanon was unsuccessful in bringing about either the desired outcome in Lebanon or his own success at the polls the following month.

The dismal record of those weeks between March and May 1996 seemed to show (as noted in detail in chapter 7) how easy it can be for the dynamics of a high-stakes peacemaking venture to be thrown into a dramatic and damaging reverse gear. Taken together, the period between May 1995 and May 1996 witnessed some of the most dramatic twists and turns of events in the whole fifty-two-month "first act" of Israeli-Syrian peace talks. Can more success be expected from a "second act" led by Barak? At the time of this study's writing, it is still too early to say. Nevertheless, this work has broad relevance for those interested in exploring the dynamics of interstate peacemaking both in this and other parts of the world.

The Syrian-Israeli talks had many features that distinguished them from their better-known counterpart talks on the Palestinian track. For example, since 1974 the Syrians had a stable disengagement agreement with Israel, with whose performance both parties were largely satisfied. Thus, by the time of the 1991 Madrid Conference, it was clear that Syria was interested in concluding only a final-status agreement with Israel rather than any further interim agreements. On the Palestinian track, by contrast, there still remained a strong potential for an interim accord. The Oslo agreement concluded on that track in September 1993 ushered in a series of partial interim steps, while serious engagement in the "final-status" talks was pushed further into the future. In addition, Israel's conflict with Syria is a classic political-military conflict between two established states, while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is focused more centrally on issues of national identity, national values, and the search for creative formulas of national coexistence than on strictly military questions. A study of the record on the Syrian track can thus provide much rich material concerning such issues as:

- the role of leaders in peacemaking;
- problems associated with transforming popular attitudes formed through decades of hostility into those more supportive of peace diplomacy;

problems associated with conducting diplomacy with an authoritarian interlocutor (as Israel did) or, conversely, with a democratic interlocutor with a highly leak-prone political culture (as Syria did); questions of timing;

problems associated with the inevitable intrusion into any bilateral peacemaking effort of other extraneous but politically related conflicts; and

the role of a third-party sponsor—in this case, the United States.

This study is prefaced by an opening chapter that locates the Israel-Syria negotiation within the broader peace effort launched at Madrid and provides some essential background on the special features of the Israeli-Syrian conflict. The substantive study of developments in the Israeli-Syrian bilateral talks begins in chapters 2 and 3. Chapters 4 through 7 delve into the events of May 1995 through May 1996 in greater detail. Chapter 8 provides a summary of lessons learned—both those articulated in interviews conducted for this study by former high-level participants in the talks themselves, and those that have become evident through the conduct of the study.

