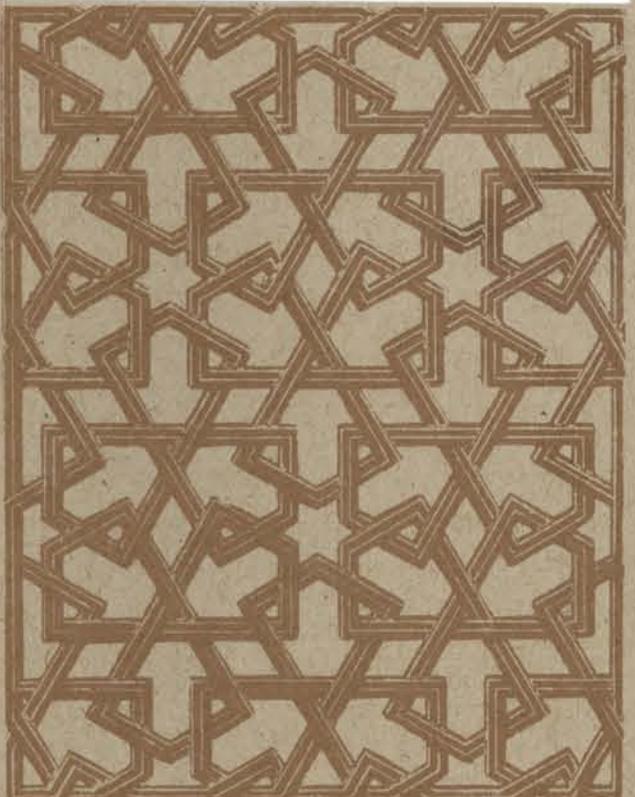


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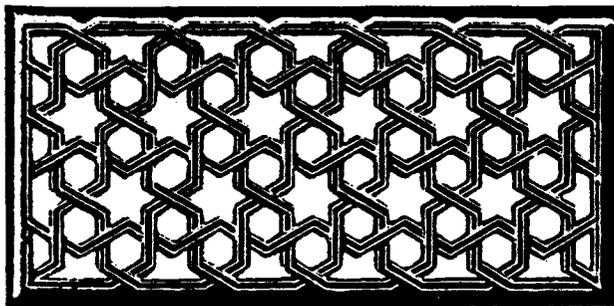
**TOWARD A SYRIAN-ISRAELI  
PEACE AGREEMENT:  
PERSPECTIVE OF A FORMER NEGOTIATOR**

**YOSSI OLMERT**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970 ended Syria's chronic instability and placed it at the forefront of the pan-Arab struggle against Israel. For many years, Syria was the most militant of the front-line Arab states and rejected any notion of peaceful co-existence with Israel. Yet, despite its radical posture, the regime avoided untimely war with Israel and tried to improve relations with the United States, even as it remained a pivotal ally of the Soviet Union.

In response to the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, Assad undertook a massive military build-up throughout the 1980s in an attempt to achieve "strategic parity" with Israel. The effort severely strained Syria's highly centralized and inefficient socialist economy and ultimately proved elusive. At the same time, Assad worked to undermine U.S. peace initiatives in the region in order to demonstrate—albeit negatively—Syria's central role in any political settlement. Yet even as he succeeded in using proxies to scuttle the U.S.-brokered Israel-Lebanon accord and force the withdrawal of U.S. and Israeli forces from Beirut, Assad achieved a *modus vivendi* with Israel in southern Lebanon, strictly observed the 1974 disengagement agreement on the Golan, and was careful not to provoke hostilities with Israel under unfavorable circumstances.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Iraq's crushing defeat in the Gulf War represented both a strategic crisis for Assad and an opportunity for a long-desired rapprochement with the United States. Familiar notions of a bi-polar world rooted in conflict and confrontation were replaced with a new world order dominated by the United States. Syria's entry into the post-war Madrid peace talks reflected a sober evaluation of changing geo-political realities, but did not amount to a renunciation of its traditional positions. Syria demanded full Israeli withdrawal from all territories occupied in 1967; the Shamir government resisted territorial compromise, and the result was deadlock.

Yitzhak Rabin's willingness to discuss withdrawal on the Golan in exchange for full peace represented a clear departure from his predecessors and yielded a more fruitful dialogue with Syria. But the Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles caught Assad by surprise, threatening his insistence on a comprehensive settlement. As with Camp David, Assad misjudged the desire on both sides to move beyond the status quo. Faced once again with the prospect of being marginalized, his strategic calculus has shifted from whether to make a deal to settling on a price.

Syria's minimum demands remain sovereignty over the Golan and total withdrawal of Israeli armed forces. Assad has persistently rejected Israeli requests to upgrade the political level of the talks, open a backchannel, or offer confidence-building measures to convince a skeptical Israeli public of Syria's goodwill.

Under Rabin, Israel has suggested that the extent of its withdrawal be tied to the extent of peace offered by Syria. Based on the positions enunciated by the two parties, a peace agreement, phased in over an extended period, is feasible, and could evolve from a political-military agreement between governments into a positive new reality between peoples.



## INTRODUCTION

According to a sympathetic biographer, Hafez al-Assad represents, “more than any Arab statesman of his day, the Arabs’ aspiration to be masters of their own destiny in their own region. While this aspiration remains largely frustrated, Assad has at least ensured that the case for Arab rights and security can no longer be ignored. This is what his long struggle has been about.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet, in the summer of 1991, in what seemed a sharp break from the past, the veteran struggler decided to respond positively to an American initiative and send his diplomats to the Madrid peace conference and the ensuing bilateral talks with Israel.

This paper offers a political and diplomatic narrative of Israel’s negotiations with Syria since the fall of 1991, and in so doing attempts to answer several major questions: Was Assad’s decision to participate in the Madrid process a departure from traditional Syrian policies? What were the regional and global developments that motivated his decision? Finally, is peace between Syria and Israel possible, and if so, under what conditions?

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd., 1988), p. 492.



# THE EVOLUTION OF SYRIA'S REGIONAL POLICY UNDER ASSAD

Historically, Syria has served as the seedbed for a number of regional ideologies: anti-Zionism, pan-Syrianism, Arab nationalism, and Arab Socialism. Yet the inherent political weakness of the Syrian state until 1970, its chronic instability and lack of a ruling center, communal and social polarization, and conflicting external pressures all made it impossible for Syria to realize the messages and programs of these ideologies.

The advent of Hafez al-Assad's regime in November 1970 marked a real change in this state of affairs, as it dramatically narrowed the gap between Syria's ambitions and its capabilities. Under the strong leadership of Assad, Syria has actively pursued a foreign policy designed to match its historical claims. At the heart of his foreign policy has been an unrelenting effort to place Syria in the forefront of the Arab struggle against Israel.

Over the course of the Assad era, Syrian policy *vis-à-vis* the Arab-Israeli conflict took shape in three stages:

## Stage I: 1970-75

During Assad's first three years in power, his immediate aim was to pull Syria out of its isolation in the Arab world, the result of his predecessors' extremist policies. Syria's chief goal was to improve relations with Egypt, which became friendlier than at any time since the collapse of the Egyptian-Syrian union in 1961, as evidenced by Syria's belated acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 242. Egyptian-Syrian cooperation advanced most dramatically in the joint preparations for the October 1973 War and in the early stages of the fighting itself.

However, the war also exposed fundamental differences between the two countries' attitudes toward the conflict with Israel. Whereas Egypt launched the war in order to force Israel to accept a political settlement that would also require major Arab concessions, Syria was adamantly opposed to any concessions. The two countries' peace process strategies after the 1973 War also manifested their different approaches: while Egypt started down the long road toward Camp David, Syria maintained its official hostility toward Israel and refused to proceed beyond the May 1974 disengagement of forces agreement (which they refused to even sign themselves, commissioning instead an Egyptian officer to sign on their behalf).<sup>2</sup>

Both Egypt and Syria viewed the October War as a turning point in the Arab-Israeli conflict, but while Egypt saw new possibilities for Arab political gains, Syria saw new military prospects for the Arabs. As a prominent Syrian military commentator, Haytham al-Ayyubi, stated, the October War was an example of the Arabs' ability to achieve "strategic parity" with Israel. Israel,

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<sup>2</sup> On Assad's early years in power and the consolidation of his authority, see Moshe Maoz, *The Sphinx of Damascus* (Tel Aviv: Ovir, 1988), pp. 84-92; 97-113 (in Hebrew).

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Ayyubi argued, was forced to make concessions it had never intended only because it suffered major blows during the war. Arab diplomacy after the war reaped the fruits of military success, he said.<sup>3</sup> In Syrian eyes, Israel's "defeat" in the war had shown the Arabs the right way, namely that a unified Arab front against Israel could succeed. In contrast, in Syrian eyes, Egypt split Arab ranks, resulting in a strategic Arab loss and corresponding Israeli gains that tipped the strategic balance in Israel's favor. This perceived state of affairs led Damascus to adopt a policy aimed at closing the gap between the Arabs and Israel at all costs.

### Stage II: 1975-1979

After 1975, following the second Sinai agreement between Egypt and Israel, Syria looked for an alternative to its crumbling alliance with Egypt, one that could restore the strategic balance between the Arabs and Israel. The Syrians also hoped that cementing an Arab alliance under their control would deter Egypt from making a unilateral peace with Israel. Thus, in September 1975, Syrian Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam announced that Syria sought to establish a united Arab front extending from Aqaba in the south to Naqura in the north.<sup>4</sup>

For a front like this to be effective, Syria had to reach understandings with Jordan, the PLO, and Lebanon. But in the end, after a short-lived alliance with King Hussein and Yasser Arafat crumbled, the only success was Lebanon.

Ba'thist Syria and royalist, pro-Western Jordan were traditional adversaries, but Assad sought to improve relations soon after he came to power following the abortive Syrian invasion of northern Jordan in the so-called "Black September" of 1970. Egypt's separate peace with Israel, which both Syria and Jordan opposed (though for different reasons), boosted their slow, gradual improvement in relations. Ties with Jordan became a cornerstone of Syria's foreign policy until the late 1970s, when the Eastern front collapsed and Jordan opted for a strategic realignment toward Iraq, Syria's arch-rival.

Another key member of any Syrian-led Arab coalition was the PLO, with which the Ba'th regime had long maintained a love-hate relationship. Syria has always resisted the PLO's claim to independent Palestinian decision-making. According to Ba'thist doctrine, finding the solution to the Palestinian problem was a pan-Arab task in which Syria had to play a major role because Palestine was part of historic "Greater Syria." Moreover, Syria wanted to use the Palestinians as a tool in its own bid to topple rival Arab regimes, first in Jordan and later in Lebanon.<sup>5</sup> Egypt's agreements with Israel in the mid-1970s also gave renewed impetus to Syria's relations with the PLO; indeed, in the summer of 1975, Syria called upon the PLO leadership to unite with its own.<sup>6</sup> The PLO did not comply and bilateral relations were aggravated

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<sup>3</sup> *Tishrin*, October 10, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> *Al Mustaqbal*, September 7, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Reuven Avi-Ran, *The Syrian-Palestinian Conflict in Lebanon: Syrian Nationalism versus Palestinian Particularism* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Dayan Center, 1985), (in Hebrew).

<sup>6</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, "Stages in Syria's Policy in the Conflict with Israel," in Alouf Hareven and Yechiam Padan (Eds.), *Between War and Settlement: The Arab-Israeli Conflict Since October 1973* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Shiloah Institute, 1977), p. 48 (in Hebrew).

by Syria's 1976 intervention in Lebanon's civil war, which pitted the two sides against each other.

Until Syria's deployment of troops in Lebanon more than a year after the beginning of the civil war, Damascus' involvement in the Lebanon crisis was indirect and largely involved attempts at mediation between the warring factions. In early 1976, a number of factors forced the Syrians to be more concerned about the course of the crisis. These included impressive victories by the anti-Syrian Lebanese National Movement (LNM) headed by the Druze leader Kamal Jumblat, which might have enabled the PLO to establish an independent territorial base in Lebanon beyond Syrian control, as well as the fear of possible partition of Lebanon and the creation of an Israeli-backed Christian state.<sup>7</sup> Damascus viewed this latter scenario as a strategic threat and an affront to the core principles of Arab nationalism.

The threatened disintegration of the Lebanese state provided Syria with the chance to fulfill an age-old ambition to dominate Lebanon.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, this disintegration confronted Syria with a number of risks. The Syrian leadership decided that military intervention was unavoidable, but Israel's objections had to be overcome. Israel resented Syria's threats to annex Lebanon, warned against a unilateral Syrian intervention, and was concerned for the fate of the Maronites whom it considered potential allies. Yet the Israelis were not eager to intervene militarily and risk a war with Syria, particularly only three years after the 1973 War. Instead, the Israeli government believed that Israel should "help the Christians to help themselves." In addition, the Israelis feared that the United States would object to any intervention on their part, and they did not want to jeopardize their blossoming political dialogue with Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

At that particular juncture, therefore, Israel and Syria maintained a measure of common interest in Lebanon, while the other dimensions of their rivalry, such as the Palestinian question and the Golan Heights, remained dormant. With the help of U.S. mediation, the two countries were thus able to reach a *modus vivendi* in Lebanon, known as the Red Line Agreement. In it, Syria committed itself not to dispatch its forces beyond a line stretching from Sidon in western Lebanon to Huna in the southeast. Syria also undertook not to use its air force against ground targets in Lebanon or deploy ground-to-air missiles in that country.<sup>10</sup> This agreement amounted to a *de facto* partition of Lebanon between Syria and Israel and attested to the existence of a pragmatic element in Syria's approach toward Israel, which was further demonstrated by Syria's strict adherence to the 1974 Golan disengagement agreement.

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<sup>7</sup> Yossi Olmert, "The Lebanese Crisis: The Dangers to Security in the Mediterranean," *Adelphi Papers*, no. 230, Part II, spring 1988, pp. 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> On the historic dimension of Syrian-Lebanese relations, see Yossi Olmert, "Syria and the Question of Lebanon's Independence: A False Dilemma?," *Asian and African Studies* (forthcoming, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Yitzhak Rabin, *A Service Notebook* (memoirs), vol. 2, (Tel Aviv: Ma'ariv Publishing House, 1979), pp. 502-7 (in Hebrew).

<sup>10</sup> Rabin, p. 503; On the U.S. role in Lebanon, see R.W. Stoakey, "The United States," in P. Edward Haley and Lewis W. Snider (Eds.), *Lebanon in Crisis* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1979), pp. 225-48.

### Stage III: 1979-1991

For six years, until 1982, the Red Line Agreement helped manage Israeli and Syrian interests in Lebanon. During this time, however, Syria's overall regional standing suffered badly as a result of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 and the subsequent Camp David Accords and Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

These developments came as a bitter surprise to Assad, who remained committed to his position that any Arab negotiation with Israel could only take place within the framework of an international conference under UN auspices, in which the Arab parties participated via a unified Arab delegation. Sadat, for his part, correctly viewed this position as a sure recipe for deadlock and decided to proceed unilaterally with Israel.

With Sadat's defection from the ranks of Arab struggle against Israel, the pressure was clearly on Syria. On one hand, it saw the Israel-Egypt rapprochement as a vindication of its accusations voiced since 1975, that Sadat was planning a separate peace with Israel. On the other hand, Syria feared that the impending Egyptian-Israeli peace could precipitate an Israeli attack on Syria, given that Israel was now freed from focusing on the long Egyptian front. Syria's reaction to this possibility was three-fold: it reiterated its readiness to fight Israel alone, even in "a hundred wars;"<sup>11</sup> it tried to overcome its deep-rooted hostility toward the rival Ba'thist regime in Baghdad and come to terms with it so as to create an effective rejectionist front;<sup>12</sup> and, in October 1980 it concluded a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup> Overall, however, things went badly for Assad. Relations with Iraq soon deteriorated, Amman opted for Baghdad, the PLO remained elusive, Lebanon proved hard to digest, and the Syrian-Soviet treaty, though important, seemed insufficient as Syria sought an even more far-reaching pact that would not restrict its freedom of action.

Assad's only ray of hope seemed to come from the successful Iranian revolution to the east. Indeed, from 1979 to the present, a strategic alliance with Iran has been a relatively stable pillar of Syria's regional policy. As Iranian scholar R.K. Ramazani stated, "both the challenge of revolutionary Iran and the response of other Middle Eastern states to Iran's challenge are multidimensional. Therefore, an exclusive emphasis on the military, ideological, or political (and one might add, the economical) aspects of these phenomena will not adequately explain them."<sup>14</sup> This general observation is particularly true in the case of the Iranian-Syrian relationship. The two regimes profess fundamentally different official ideologies, and tend to formulate and present their respective foreign policies in ideological terms: for Iran, the supra-national Islamic revolution, and for Syria, secular and socialist pan-Arabism. While these two ideologies seem irreconcilable, Iran and Syria have nonetheless found common ground on a variety of regional issues (e.g., the Iran-Iraq War, the Lebanese crisis), and have developed

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<sup>11</sup> *Al-Ray al-'Amm*, February 14, 1978.

<sup>12</sup> *Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS)*, 1978-79, pp. 806-7, 854-56; On the longstanding rivalry between the two Ba'th regimes, see Eberhard Kienle, *Ba'th v. Ba'th: The Conflict Between Syria and Iraq, 1968-1989* (New York: Martin's Press, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> *MECS*, 1980-81, p. 800.

<sup>14</sup> Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1986), p. 3.

extensive economic ties as well. Their political interests, though similar, have not been identical. On balance, Iranian-Syrian relations in the past fifteen years have been characterized by cooperation amid occasional strain and competition.<sup>15</sup> This was particularly evident following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 1985.

Since then, Syria has concentrated its efforts on achieving a *pax Syriana* in Lebanon, which does not coincide with Iran's vision of Lebanon and the role of its ally, Hezbollah. Whereas Syria wants to maintain law and order in Lebanon in order to pacify it and lead it into a new era based on Syrian political hegemony and a formal Beirut-Damascus "special relationship," Iran continues to view Lebanon as fertile soil for its revolutionary message. Thus, the Syrian vision of a stable Lebanon contrasted with Iran's vision of a radical, revolutionary Lebanon. The conflicting visions came to a head on various occasions, such as the killing of twenty-three Hezbollahis by the Syrians in February 1987, and other smaller incidents.<sup>16</sup> Yet both Iran and Syria were at pains to avoid an all-out collision in Lebanon, occasionally using Hezbollah against Western interests, as in the case of hostages, and almost uninterrupted using the militant Shi'a against Israel in southern Lebanon. In 1992 Hezbollah took part in the Lebanese parliamentary elections, effectively acquiescing to the new political order in Lebanon, which was very much in line with Syrian designs.

#### **"Strategic Parity" with Israel**

The beginning of the Syrian-Iranian alliance coincided with the adoption of the concept of "strategic parity" with Israel, which was Syria's official doctrine throughout the 1980s, and the most important element of the third stage in the evolution of Assad's regional policy. The various dimensions of the concept of strategic parity can be drawn from numerous speeches by Syrian leaders and commentaries by the official media, as well as from information about Syria's military build-up and responses to emerging political crises.

The ideological dimension of "strategic parity" rests on four deeply-rooted assumptions:

1) The Arab-Israeli conflict is a clash of civilizations, not only states.<sup>17</sup> As in previous historic clashes between civilizations in the region, Syria believes time is on the side of the indigenous Arabs and not the invading "aggressors." However, this does not mean that they should be inactive until they achieve final victory against Israel. Rather, such a victory could come sooner if the Arabs sustained their pressure on Israel. As Assad told the Kuwaiti newspaper

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<sup>15</sup> Yossi Olmert, "Iranian-Syrian Relations: Between Islam and Realpolitik," in David Menashri (Ed.), *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 171-189.

<sup>16</sup> *MECS*, 1987, p. 644.

<sup>17</sup> Radio Damascus, June 19, 1982; June 22, 1982. Israel, the Syrians argued, "was previously described by colonialist and imperialist circles as the pearl of the Orient in the various civilized cultural and humanitarian spheres...[however] Israel was a leading hotbed of international terrorism and a distinguished inhuman, fascist and racist entity."

*Al-Qabas*, the Arabs ought to catch up with what they had missed in the past, just as the Jews had returned to Palestine after forty generations.<sup>18</sup>

2) The Arabs ought not sign any binding peace treaty with Israel, but rather leave open the option of continuing the conflict until Israel's comprehensive defeat.

3) The conflict with Israel is a task for a unified Arab nation in which Syria plays its rightful, traditional role at the helm. Syria should not go its own way, as Egypt did, and sign a separate agreement with Israel. The Golan Heights should be returned to Syria, and other Arab occupied territories are also a matter of Syrian concern.

4) Israel is an aggressive state by nature, an entity that lives by the sword. For this reason, the Arabs could gain concessions from Israel only if they maintained an effective military option that could back up political and economic pressures on Israel. The military option ought to be upheld by the entire Arab world, but in the meantime Syria was willing to carry the burden of the conflict by itself. The aim of Arab force was to get Israel to make concessions it refused to make otherwise.

The drive for strategic parity responded to three of Damascus' political needs: it was a clear manifestation of Syria's claim to centrality in Arab politics, offered the Syrian people a noble explanation of their economic predicament, and explained why Syria had not yet started a war against Israel. Taken as a whole, strategic parity was clearly a multidimensional and comprehensive concept, of which military preparedness was only one facet. Yet this was its crucial element, designed to deter Israel from an attack on Syria and perhaps even create conditions that would make it possible for Syria to launch its own attack against Israel under proper circumstances.

Over time, a number of political challenges tested the concept of strategic parity, and Syria's response reflected the ups and downs of its regional situation at any given moment. Interestingly, Syria did not reject outright every initiative to come its way, and offered a range of responses.

### **The Reagan Plan, 1982**

Syria's initial negative response to President Reagan's regional peace initiative—that it was no more than a new version of the hated Camp David Accords—was not a total rejection.<sup>19</sup> To be sure, Assad resented the fact that he had not been consulted by the United States before it launched the plan, and he could hardly have been expected to appreciate the special status awarded to Jordan in the American initiative. Damascus also viewed the timing of the plan with suspicion, coming so soon after the evacuation of Syrian and PLO forces from Beirut. On the other hand, after an additional review of the plan, Syrian commentators stressed that the Reagan Plan might have signified the failure of the Camp David Accords and were heartened by Israel's sharp rebuttal to it.<sup>20</sup>

Abd al-Halim Khaddam himself visited Washington at the end of 1982, as part of a delegation of Arab foreign ministers, and some Syrian-American dialogue took place. At that time, Syria's standing in Lebanon was weak in the absence of a firm Soviet commitment to resupply its army following military

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<sup>18</sup> *Al Qabas*, January 24, 1987.

<sup>19</sup> *Tishrin*, September 4, 1982.

<sup>20</sup> *Tishrin*, September 11, 1982.

clashes with Israel during the summer. For the same reason, Syria's response to the resolution of the second Fez summit in September 1982 was muted. The Fez resolutions reflected a compromise between Syria's hardline position on the one hand and the more moderate stance of other Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia. Specifically, the resolutions contained a reference to UN Security Council guarantees for "peace for all the states of the region" and also referred to Israel's pre-1967 borders (as well as to the Bourguiba Plan's recognition of the 1947 partition boundaries). In addition, Syria agreed to explore "the position of the U.S....regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict" and waived its demand for a reference to Arab plans to mobilize all Arab resources (including oil) for an armed confrontation with Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, Assad was in dire straits in the aftermath of the 1982 war, and some pragmatism on his part was necessary. It was only months later, after the Syrian army had been re-supplied by the Soviet Union and Israel's troubles in Lebanon mounted, that Syria soundly rejected the Reagan Plan,<sup>22</sup> which by then was all but moribund, having also been rejected by Israel.

### **Israel-Lebanon Accord**

On May 17, 1983, Israel and Lebanon signed a peace accord with the help of American mediation. Damascus vehemently opposed the agreement, which called for Israeli and Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon and the establishment of a new security regime along the Israeli-Lebanese border. The Syrians always rejected the notion that their presence in Lebanon was comparable to Israel's, claiming that theirs was legitimated by the request of Lebanese President Franjiyya in 1976, whereas Israel's amounted to an illegitimate military occupation. Moreover, Syria viewed the agreement as a continuation of the Camp David Accords, particularly Israeli statements about including Lebanon "in a triangular of peace with Egypt and Israel." Lastly, Syria felt the new Israeli-Lebanese relationship could constitute an immediate security threat to its most vital interests. Consequently, Assad committed himself to torpedo the agreement. By employing a range of Lebanese proxies—Shi'i, Druze, Sunni, and even Maronite-oriented—Syria was able to marshal Lebanese forces even more powerful than the army of President Amin Gemayel. Through the use of direct military pressure as well as spectacular terror attacks against Israeli, American, and Lebanese targets, Syria was able to weaken dramatically the resolve of all these players to the point where Gemayel, Israel, and the mainly American Multinational Force (MNF) all succumbed. By early 1984, the Israel-Lebanon Accord was dead.<sup>23</sup>

### **Strategic Parity: An Elusive Ambition**

In 1984-85, when Israel was under increasing pressure in Lebanon and preparing its unilateral withdrawal, Syrian utterances expressed growing self-confidence and satisfaction with its efforts to achieve strategic parity. An elaborate analysis of Israeli weaknesses, published in June 1984, expressed the prevailing Syrian view. The author was a former Israeli Arab, Habib Kawaji, who

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<sup>21</sup> *MECS*, 1981-82, p. 863.

<sup>22</sup> *MECS*, 1982-83, pp. 816-18.

<sup>23</sup> See Yossi Olmert, *Futile Diplomacy in the Middle East: Israel, Syria, Lebanon, the U.S. and the May 17, 1983 Agreement* (forthcoming, 1994).

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had left Israel in 1968 and, after a short stay in Beirut, moved to Damascus. In his article, Kawaji described Israel's leadership crisis and its social and economic problems, arguing that even Israel's army had suffered profound shocks from the war in Lebanon and its aftermath. While Israel enjoyed quantitative as well as technological superiority over the Arab forces, Kawaji wrote, it had achieved very little in the war from a military point of view. In Lebanon, for the first time since 1973, the initiative had returned to Arab hands under Syria's leadership. Indeed, the article said the achievements of the Lebanon War, from an Arab point of view, were even greater than those of the October War in 1973, because this time Syria fought alone. Finally, the author called on the Arabs to press their advantage over Israel since "Israel could not stand more than one military defeat."<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding the combative rhetoric of commentators, the Syrians were careful not to provoke hostilities with Israel. Although Israel's failure in Lebanon had somewhat diminished its power of deterrence toward Syria, and its unilateral withdrawal in 1985 was largely provoked by the pressure exerted by Syrian proxies, the two countries continued the pattern of crisis management in Lebanon that had existed prior to the 1982 War. The situation amounted to a continuation of Syrian policy since 1976: Lebanon was not to become the arena for a military clash with Israel. As Syria's highest political body, the National Progressive Front, declared during the Lebanon War:

We have announced and frequently stressed that the achievement of our short-term objectives of liberating the occupied Arab territories and restoring the Palestinian Arab people's legitimate rights are linked to the accomplishment of a strategic balance between Syria and the Zionist enemy. [However] a war, if it takes place within the current imbalance...will never realize our aims. Therefore, a war that could achieve our aim is one that we ourselves choose and whose time and place are fixed by us and not by the enemy.<sup>25</sup>

Tension remained, however, fueled by Syria's military build-up and reliance upon terrorism, notably the attempt to plant a bomb on an El Al aircraft in London in April 1986.<sup>26</sup> But in light of Assad's proven reticence and restraint, Israel focused increasingly on Syrian intentions and responded only with a war of words, thereby avoiding hostilities.

This cautious approach guided Assad throughout the 1980s, particularly during Syria's military build-up. Syria was to be ready for war, but did not intend to initiate it under unfavorable circumstances. It made feverish and costly preparations for a possible showdown with Israel, and focused on three areas: 1) developing a "neutralizing response" to Israel's military strength in the form of well-equipped and heavily-manned lines of defense along the border in the Golan Heights and in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, a very dense ground-to-air defense system, and coast-to-sea missiles; 2) developing a "retaliatory response" by amassing an impressive number of ground-to-ground missiles; and 3) developing an "offensive response" by establishing a large number of mobile and armored units, airborne commando units, tactical

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<sup>24</sup> *Al-Ard*, June 7, 1984.

<sup>25</sup> Radio Damascus, June 19, 1982, June 22, 1982.

<sup>26</sup> *MECS*, 1986, pp. 619-20.

ground-to-ground missiles, and perhaps also chemical weapons.<sup>27</sup> This impressive build-up required more than \$20 billion worth of foreign arms, and while the Soviet Union remained Syria's main arms supplier, it was not the only one.

Syria's massive military build-up created an immense economic burden. Ominous signs appeared as early as 1983, as the economy staggered and groaned "under the pressure of enormous military spending"<sup>28</sup> that increased throughout the 1980s. Coupled with the inefficient, centralized and highly bureaucratic socialist character of Syria's economy, domestic economic difficulties became a major impediment to continuing the military build-up in the latter part of the decade. Indeed, partly as a result of the recognition that Syria was actually falling behind Israel rather than catching up, Assad began to describe "strategic parity" in terms that were not strictly military. He urged the Syrian people to continue their progress in all spheres of life in order to match Israel, indicating social and cultural dimensions to the equation.<sup>29</sup>

This broader strategic understanding mounted over time under the pressure of geopolitical changes. In 1992 Assad observed that:

...in the second half of the eighties, the feature of qualitative world changes began to loom on the horizon. All the previous world changes that emerged in the aftermath of World War I...seemed of little significance, in terms of repercussions on the Arab homeland, when compared to the upcoming far-reaching changes. Instead of making progress we found ourselves continually retreating.<sup>30</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the crushing military defeat of Iraq in the Gulf War inflicted mortal blows on the concept of "strategic parity." In Assad's view, the goal of Syria's alliance with the Soviet Union had always been to provide Syria with a global strategic umbrella. According to Syria's conventional wisdom, American support dramatically increased the imbalance between Israel and the Arabs in favor of the former, and while the Soviets tried to restore the balance, they could always do more. Be that as it may, without the Soviets the Arabs hardly stood any chance of restoring the balance by themselves. By April 1987, when Assad visited Moscow to see the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, he could catch a glimpse of the future. Before the visit, it was reported that Assad would raise the issue of an international peace conference and the emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel.<sup>31</sup> But in fact Gorbachev himself brought up the issue of Soviet-Israeli relations, surprising his guest by suggesting at the state dinner that the absence of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Israel was in itself abnormal.<sup>32</sup>

Although Saddam Hussein's regime had been Syria's archenemy since the Ba'hist coup in 1968 (save for a short period in 1979-80), Syria looked to Iraq and its huge military potential as a strategic hinterland in times of hostility with Israel (as it did during the October 1973 War). Assad believed

<sup>27</sup> *MECS*, 1988, p. 735.

<sup>28</sup> *MECS*, 1983-84, p. 280.

<sup>29</sup> *Al Qabas*, January 24, 1987; *Tishrin*, April 12, 1987.

<sup>30</sup> Assad speech, Radio Damascus, March 12, 1992.

<sup>31</sup> *TASS*, April 24, 1987.

<sup>32</sup> *Al Nahar al-'Arabi wal Duwali*, May 4, 1987.

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that Saddam's invasion of Kuwait had played into Israel's hands, and could very well have been part of an Israeli-inspired scheme.<sup>33</sup> By then, however, Syria's resumption of relations with Egypt (severed after Sadat's visit to Israel) had initiated a major shift in policy, driven by Assad's desire to form an alternative axis to Saddam's rising power, and by the hope of Egyptian support in his bid to improve relations with the United States.<sup>34</sup>

Assad's world view shattered under the impact of these global events. In his view, a new world order emerged, moving toward disarmament, peaceful dispute resolution, democratic governance, and economic growth. Assad's familiar notions of a bi-polar world rooted in confrontation and conflict were no longer meaningful, as the instincts and beliefs he had developed over long, hard-fought years of struggle collided with his pragmatic side. He had to formulate a strategy that would address the unfolding new reality of a uni-polar world, dominated by the United States.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> *MECS*, 1987, pp. 649-650; *MECS*, 1988, pp. 742-44.

## SYRIA AND THE UNITED STATES: THE SEARCH FOR MUTUAL TRUST

Ever since Henry Kissinger's first visit to Damascus in the aftermath of the 1973 war, Assad had tried to persuade various American administrations that Syria was a key Arab state with power and influence that the United States could not ignore. That, in itself, constituted a major departure from traditional Syrian policy toward the United States, inasmuch as anti-Americanism had been a core belief of Syrian leaders as far back as the pre-Ba'thist days of the 1950s.

Assad maintained an ambiguous attitude toward the United States. Like many other Arabs he believed that Israel commanded overwhelming influence in the United States and was thus able to affect American policy in the region. Yet, according to classic Ba'thist doctrine, Israel was a creation of American imperialism and its leading representative in the Middle East, and as such was susceptible to American pressures. Either way, Assad considered it essential that he conduct his own dialogue with the United States, and so he entered into the negotiations with Kissinger that led to the signing of the 1974 disengagement agreement, hoping that it would foster an evolution in U.S. Middle East policy. For relatively short periods, Assad did manage to enjoy a constructive and mutually beneficial relationship with the United States. But much of the time the relationship ranged from tense to acrimonious because Washington and Damascus had conflicting visions on a range of regional and global issues.

In 1976, U.S. mediation helped facilitate the Red Line Agreement between Israel and Syria regarding Lebanon, and a year later, in May 1977, Assad met President Carter in Geneva. Soon afterwards, however, came Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and the ensuing Camp David Accords, and Syria found itself taking up its familiar role as leader of the anti-American camp in the Arab world.

The Lebanon War and its aftermath led to a heightened level of U.S. diplomacy. In response, Syria, realizing the need for some global balance, sought closer contacts with the United States. Both Foreign Minister Khaddam and Assad's brother Rifat visited Washington in 1982, and Damascus' initial reaction to the Reagan Plan of September 1982 was cautious. Early in 1983, however, Syria's attitude changed. When a bomb at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut killed nearly fifty people in April 1983, a Shi'i organization known as Al Jihad al-Islami claimed responsibility,<sup>35</sup> but Israeli experts believe that such an attack could not have been carried out without Syrian backing and supervision.<sup>36</sup> In May 1983, Secretary of State George Shultz visited Damascus in an attempt to persuade Assad to support the impending Israeli-Lebanese agreement, but to no avail. Syria resented the fact that it had not been consulted about the agreement and objected to Israel's demand that the

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<sup>35</sup> *Al Dustur*, April 25, 1983.

<sup>36</sup> *Ha'aretz*, April 22, 1983.

Syrian army withdraw from Lebanon. U.S.-Syrian relations deteriorated sharply after the signing of the Israeli-Lebanese agreement, to the point that fire was exchanged between Syrian troops and the U.S. Sixth Fleet.<sup>37</sup> On October 23, 1983, two explosions demolished the headquarters of the French and American units in the Multinational Force, killing at least 241 U.S. Marines.<sup>38</sup> Again, the Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility, but in Israel "official military quarters" charged that the attacks were carried out by a group called Al-Amal al Islami led by Hussein Musawi, a dissident from Al-Amal whose main base was in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. This meant that his actions, though ideologically inspired by Iran, were controlled and supervised by Syria.<sup>39</sup> It was thus no surprise that Syrian-American relations soured.

Following the Hindawi trial in London in 1986 (in which Syria was implicated in an attempt to place a bomb aboard an El Al plane),<sup>40</sup> the United States recalled its ambassador from Damascus and put Syria on the State Department's official list of countries supporting international terrorism. Other punitive measures followed, and U.S.-Syrian relations reached their nadir. Despite official frostiness, however, the United States never sought to freeze Syria out completely. In fact, Washington made it clear that Syria could play "an important role in a key region of the world but it cannot expect to be accepted as a responsible power or treated as one as long as it continues to use terrorism as an instrument of its foreign policy."<sup>41</sup> This statement amounted to an open invitation to Syria to re-establish its diplomatic dialogue with the United States by changing its policy on terrorism. Syria responded in early 1987 by taking steps, including curtailing the activities of the Abu Nidal Organization, that led to a resumption of full diplomatic relations with Washington in September 1987.<sup>42</sup>

While the two countries may have wanted to maintain a fruitful diplomatic dialogue, they did not find it easy to do so. Assad, fearful that Washington might try to bypass him and ignore Syria's key role in Middle East politics, worked to undermine U.S. initiatives, hoping to demonstrate, albeit negatively, his indispensability. As for the United States, particularly during the Reagan administration, Syria assumed the dubious status of a pariah state alongside Iran, Libya, and the PLO, with Damascus featured as the Soviet bulwark in the Middle East. Nonetheless, even during the Reagan years, Washington hoped for changes in Syrian policies that would make a positive political dialogue feasible.

The need for dialogue with the United States became more important than ever in the late 1980s; indeed, the "world changes" (as Assad called them) forced him to review his entire strategy. He understood, albeit grudgingly, that the imbalance between the Arabs in general—and Syria in particular—and Israel was tilting dramatically in the latter's favor. To stop or at least slow the deterioration in Syria's position, he needed to establish a new relationship with the United States, the last superpower. In order to start a process of actual rapprochement, it was essential to build some confluence of interest with

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<sup>37</sup> *MECS*, 1982-83, pp. 818-20; 1983-84; pp. 703-5.

<sup>38</sup> *Agence France Presse*, October 24, 1983; October 25, 1983.

<sup>39</sup> *Ma'ariv*, October 28, 1983.

<sup>40</sup> *MECS*, 1986, pp. 77-79

<sup>41</sup> *MECS*, 1986, pp. 621-22.

<sup>42</sup> *MECS*, 1987, pp. 652-53.

Washington that would foster mutual trust, however limited. On the eve of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, Assad referred to "important changes...[which] created an imbalance and disturbance and unsteady movement toward an unknown destination." He queried what kind of "sparks will spread the fire?"<sup>43</sup> Saddam soon spread the fire, and Assad found himself on America's side.

Yet even Assad's perennial enmity with Saddam did not ensure his participation in the military coalition against the Iraqi dictator. Generous Saudi handouts (estimated at \$2-3 billion) provided the initial incentive for his decision to dispatch Syria's ninth armored division from the Golan Heights to the Saudi desert. This was an encouraging signal to U.S. policymakers, who were convinced that Assad's active participation in the anti-Saddam coalition was essential for the coalition's Arab legitimacy. As they saw it, Syria could turn what was shaping up to be a conservative, traditionally pro-Western coalition, vulnerable to anti-imperialist charges, into a more respectable, nationalist Arab effort to free Kuwait.

In addition to the overall warming in bilateral relations with the United States and financial aid from Saudi Arabia, Syria received handsome dividends for joining the U.S.-led alliance in the form of progress on three key agenda items. First, Israel's reluctance to take actions that might undermine the Arab coalition against Saddam gave Assad a "free hand" in Lebanon to move against maverick general Michel 'Awn, who had repeatedly threatened Syria's efforts to impose hegemony throughout the country. As a result, the Syrian army, backed by its air force (which was used for the first time since 1975 in clear violation of the Red Line Agreement with Israel) smashed 'Awn's forces in a quick and decisive battle on October 13, 1990. The United States, Israel, and the Arab members of the coalition acquiesced to the operation. Although the Israelis had stated publicly before the Syrian operation that they reserved the right to retain their freedom of action, their emphasis was more on their vital security interests in southern Lebanon, not Beirut.<sup>44</sup> Without admitting as much, Israel did what it took to keep Syria in the coalition, motivated above all by a desire to act in conformity with American interests and priorities. In the end, George Bush helped Assad achieve a long-sought strategic goal: securing Syria's ambitions in Lebanon.

Assad's November 1990 meeting with Bush in Geneva achieved a second key objective by providing him with a measure of international respectability and recognition as a full-fledged partner in the U.S.-led anti-Saddam coalition. Finally, these developments took place against the background of deteriorating U.S.-Israel relations, and undermining that relationship was a third long-standing item on Assad's agenda. He had followed with keen interest the mounting controversy over loan guarantees, settlements, and Jewish immigration from the Soviet Union to Israel.<sup>45</sup> Assad was surely impressed with the Bush administration's determination to confront Israel over this issue, which touched issues that are central to the historic U.S.-Israeli relationship.

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<sup>43</sup> Assad speech, Radio Damascus, May 15, 1990.

<sup>44</sup> *Yediot Aharonot*, October 12, 1990.

<sup>45</sup> Assad speech, Radio Damascus, March 12, 1992. To his mind, "Soviet Jewish immigration, in effect, was a blatant aggression on the Arabs, and, in effect, was a blatant aggression on human rights and on Arab land. The right to emigrate is one thing, and the right to emigrate in order to steal the land of others is something else."

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Assad was also much taken with the contents and tenor of President Bush's statement on March 6, 1991, that future peace settlements in the Middle East would be based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 and the principle of "land for peace." This pronouncement later came to serve as the prelude for Secretary Baker's shuttle diplomacy and the eventual convening of the Madrid peace conference.

Israel, for its part, mistrusted the Bush-Baker team. The Americans, they thought, took pains to demonstrate evenhandedness in their public diplomacy, but in concrete terms had moved closer to the Arabs at Israel's expense. High echelons in Jerusalem believed that Israel was not being fully informed about American dealings with the Arabs, that Washington had deliberately escalated the tension over loan guarantees, and that the latter had intimated to Arab leaders that American supporters of Israel would be cut down to size. Under these circumstances, the Israelis were not surprised by Assad's positive reply to Baker's invitation in the summer of 1991 to attend the Middle East peace conference in Madrid.

## MADRID AND AFTER: TALKS, HOPES AND IMPASSE

### Assad's Perceptions of the Process

Assad's decision to accept the Madrid formula constituted a departure from traditional Syrian positions on two accounts. First, the unconditional agreement to the principle of direct negotiations, without any timetable attached, seemed an acquiescence to Israel's long-held insistence on face-to-face talks. The Syrians had long championed the idea of an international conference with a unified Arab delegation, and agreeing to direct talks was a bitter pill for them to swallow. Second, the demand for a complete Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders as a *pre-condition* for Syria's participation in the talks became instead an uncompromising negotiating position *during* the talks themselves.

Like other apparent departures from established policy, it was reported to the Syrian people in characteristically understated fashion. Nothing in Assad's handling of the situation resembled Sadat's performance prior to his visit to Jerusalem. The muted pronouncements of Syrian officials reflected a hard-nosed, unsentimental understanding of what the Madrid process was all about: Syria had agreed to enter a political process whose objective was the complete withdrawal of Israel from all Arab lands occupied in 1967. From Syria's perspective, this was a "withdrawal process" rather than a "peace process." By emphasizing the element of total withdrawal, the regime indicated to the Syrian people that there was no basic change in its approach toward Israel. No efforts were undertaken by the regime to prepare the ground for an historic reconciliation with the Jewish state. According to unconfirmed press reports in Israel, Israeli intelligence informed Prime Minister Shamir that Assad had told his senior generals and Ba'ath officials that Syria had no choice but to join the peace process, due to the changing regional and global circumstances.<sup>46</sup> In brief, Assad wanted to signal that he entered the process with political expectations but not romantic illusions.

The Madrid framework—simultaneous talks between Israel and four Arab parties designed to lead to a comprehensive settlement—was compatible with Assad's policies. To his mind, Lebanon (now well under Syrian hegemony), Jordan (always reluctant to take an independent course), and the Palestinians (negotiating from a position of weakness) were all junior partners in the process. Syria was the senior Arab partner, in keeping with its traditional, hegemonic standing as "Greater Syria." Assad believed he could determine the course of the talks either by preventing progress or, conversely, sweeping all the Arabs along on his coattails. From his perspective, it would

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<sup>46</sup> It was clear from these press stories that the leak came from high army echelons, particularly intelligence circles, who have been rumored to believe that Assad's change was strategic and irreversible. Shamir's opponents used these leaks to argue that he was not genuine in his peace policy, since he ignored the professional advice of his experts.

have been preferable to have a united Arab delegation, thus ensuring there would be no separate deals between any Arab party and Israel. The Madrid formula, therefore, was not ideal, but it still seemed to offer enough assurances to Assad that he might not find himself again in an embarrassing position of being left on the sidelines of the peace process.

The Madrid framework also corresponded with Israel's interest. First, the direct, face-to-face negotiations met a traditional demand of successive Israeli governments. From Israel's perspective, direct negotiations reflected an act of Arab recognition. To be sure, Israeli governments had traditionally feared that simultaneous talks with several Arab parties would yield the lowest possible common Arab denominator, i.e., the most hard-line positions. On the other hand, the Israelis were also aware of the deep divisions running through the Arab world at the time of the Madrid peace conference and were averse to the idea of conducting peace talks only with the Palestinians, as was the agenda prior to the Gulf War.

The Likud government rejected the notion that the conflict with the Palestinians was the central problem of the Middle East. Peace with Arab states seemed more important, particularly from a military-strategic perspective, and more attainable as well. At any rate, an exclusive emphasis on the Palestinian issue could lead to painful decisions on territorial compromise in Judea and Samaria, and many in the Likud wished to evade the issue for as long as they could. Shamir himself was intrigued, for a short while, with the similarities between Assad and Sadat;<sup>47</sup> by the time he got to Madrid, however, he had grown suspicious of the Americans, particularly after President Bush's outburst regarding loan guarantees on September 12, 1991, in which he questioned the loyalty of Israel's American supporters. Shamir also disliked what he saw as U.S. coordination with the Syrians, and felt that as a consequence, he would not have a real chance to do direct and meaningful business with Syria.

### SYRIAN POSITIONS IN TALKS WITH THE SHAMIR GOVERNMENT

#### **The Target Audience**

While Syria's formal interlocutor was the Israeli delegation, it was clear that this was for protocol only, a mere formality imposed upon Syria to satisfy a traditional Israeli demand. In point of fact, the Syrians talked over the heads of the Israelis to the Americans. In accordance with the "never follow Anwar Sadat" line, Assad made no statements such as "no more wars" that could sway Israeli public opinion, or at least enhance American readiness to intervene in the talks. Rather, Syrian diplomats incessantly referred to the role of the co-sponsors of the process, meaning, in effect, the United States. In one embarrassing incident, when the Syrian chief negotiator insisted that the formula of "land for peace" appeared in the letter of invitation to Madrid, the Israelis disagreed. The Syrians later had to admit that it appeared only in the letter of assurances sent by Bush to Assad, which the Israelis were never shown.

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<sup>47</sup> Shamir said as much in the summer of 1991, but soon returned to the old rhetoric toward Syria.

Underlying the Syrian presentation was a constant expectation of American intervention.

### **The Time Framework**

Prior to the Madrid conference, the Syrians assured their Iranian and Libyan allies that the entire exercise would last only one year, a period of time sufficient to determine the prospects of success. In the talks themselves, however, the Syrians were careful not to set any time limits, and in fact more than two and a half years after Madrid they are still participating in the talks.

### **Resolutions 242 and 338**

According to the Syrians, the subject of the talks was the establishment of a just and comprehensive peace based on the full implementation of UN Resolutions 242 and 338, which they believe constitute an equation based on the formula of "land for peace." Complete Israeli withdrawal was non-negotiable, but the regime of security and peace following the withdrawal was open to discussion. Israel, the Syrians argued, consistently refrained from fulfilling UN resolutions (for example, Resolution 181 on partition), and if it had been in compliance there would be no need for the current peace talks.

### **Linkage Between the Various Tracks**

Syrian policy was to seek a "comprehensive peace" to end the Arab-Israeli conflict. As the chief Syrian negotiator adamantly told the Israelis, "mark my words, no partial or separate agreement, only a comprehensive one." By the term "comprehensive," Damascus meant that there could be no agreement between Israel and one Arab party without simultaneous agreements with all the other parties or a decision by all the Arab parties to allow one or more to go it alone with Israel. The Syrians were not as concerned with the actual progress of each of the bilateral tracks as with the possibility of a separate agreement, which they were determined to prevent.

### **Confidence Building Measures (CBMs)**

As Syria's chief negotiator put it, Israel and the Arabs would cease to be enemies once the former terminated its occupation of Arab land. Since according to the Syrians the sole agenda item was full implementation of Resolutions 242 and 338, defined as requiring complete Israeli withdrawal, there was no room for any Syrian CBMs. Indeed, Syria believed CBMs would be perceived as a sign of weakness, undermining the demand for complete withdrawal. The same rationale was behind the decision not to participate in the multilateral talks, and until April 1992, to restrict the immigration of Syrian Jews.

### **Talks and Military Build-Up**

The first reports of the delivery of Scud-C missiles from North Korea to Syria appeared in March 1991. The actual sale preceded the Gulf War and reflected long-standing military cooperation between the two countries.

Coming in the wake of Iraq's Scud attacks on Israel, however, the deliveries signaled that Syria did not intend to engage in a negotiating process with its hands tied behind its back. Syria also continued to support Palestinian rejectionists based in Damascus and Lebanese terror organizations, most notably Hezbollah. Throughout the Baker shuttles and the subsequent peace talks, Syria's military build-up continued.<sup>48</sup> Assad, ever eager to please the generals who are the mainstay of his regime, was also acting in keeping with his traditional argument that talks with Israel could not be conducted from a position of Arab military weakness.

Put succinctly, during the talks with the Shamir government, the Syrians adopted a zero-sum position: either Israel recognized its requirement to withdraw totally from the occupied territories or it would face continued confrontation with the Arabs. This was a firm, unshakable position that ruled out discussion of the substance of peace and rendered any agreement with Israel virtually impossible.

### **THE SHAMIR GOVERNMENT'S POSITIONS**

#### **Peace, Territory, and UN Resolutions**

According to the interpretation of the Shamir government, UN Resolutions 242 and 338 should be seen as a set of guidelines, not self-executing documents. The oft-repeated formula of "land for peace" could not provide the frame of reference for the peace talks because peace and territory were not on the same footing; the UN charter obligates states to establish and maintain peace, whereas territory was viewed merely as a component of a larger peace negotiation. Israel's chief negotiator, Yossi Ben-Aharon, said that Israel was cognizant of Syria's territorial demands, which were legitimate topics of discussion, but that those talks could only take place after a satisfactory Syrian clarification concerning the substance of peace. Throughout the negotiation, the Israelis repeatedly reminded the Syrians that the goal of the process was, first and foremost, to achieve peace. Peace, as the Israelis saw it, included all the elements of normalization, such as diplomatic relations, open borders, trade, and cultural relations, to be implemented as soon as possible.

With regard to territory, Ben-Aharon said the borders agreed upon would be the "secure and recognized boundaries" referred to in the text of Resolution 242. While this formula implied that there could be territorial changes in the Golan Heights, the Israeli negotiator was quick to dispel this impression, saying that Israel would not even utter the word "withdrawal" for one hundred years.

#### **Linkage Between the Various Tracks**

From Israel's perspective, "comprehensive" talks meant simultaneous talks between Israel and various Arab delegations. It did not imply simultaneous agreements with every delegations, although this was desirable.

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<sup>48</sup> It included Scud-C missiles, hundreds of T-72 tanks, over 300 mobile 155mm cannons and many other items.

Thus, in Israel's view, agreements with various Arab parties could be signed as they were reached, regardless of the state of the negotiations on other tracks.

### **Syrian Jews**

From the outset of the Madrid talks, Israel raised the question of restrictions on Syrian Jews, chiefly the ban on their right of free emigration from Syria. The Israelis did not present the case of Syrian Jews as a pre-condition for settlement, but made it abundantly clear that they expected a change in Syria's policy on the issue.

### **Syrian Involvement in Terrorism**

Israel often raised the question of Syrian support for Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist organizations, and even went so far as to present the Syrian delegation with a detailed document, the product of long and meticulous intelligence gathering, giving full information on Syria's support for terror activities directed against Israel and the West. The Israelis argued that continued Syrian support for such activities was incompatible with its participation in peace talks.

### **Israel's Public Diplomacy**

Throughout the negotiations, Israel's public diplomacy apparatus was instructed to emphasize Syria's aggressive nature. This served two purposes. First, it reflected genuine Israeli sentiments about Syria and its regime. The Syrians were long associated in the eyes of many Israelis with brutality and extremism; much of Israel has real memories of the sordid treatment of Syrian Jews, the torture of Israeli prisoners of war in Syria, and the eighteen years of border clashes prior to 1967. Second, the Israelis also sought to ensure that U.S. policy would not soften toward Syria. Thus, the American press received information on issues such as Syria's human rights violations, arms build-up, terrorism, and the involvement of high-echelon Syrian military personnel in drug trafficking activities in Lebanon and the smuggling of drugs to the United States.

### **A Moment of Opportunity: April-June 1992**

In retrospect, the tone adopted by the two parties—both in the negotiating room as well as in public—and their sharply differing positions were not conducive to any constructive dialogue. Indeed this negotiation was a "dialogue of the deaf" from its inception.

Perhaps the only window of opportunity surfaced between April and June 1992. On the eve of the last round of talks before the June 1992 Israeli Knesset elections, Assad telephoned President Bush to tell him that all Syrian Jews wishing to leave Syria could do so without hindrance. Soon afterwards, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, William Harrop, stated publicly that it was Israel's turn to respond with its own confidence-building measure. This was a major blunder. Whereas Israel had indeed broached the issue of Syrian Jews, Washington had since taken up the cause; Assad's gesture was directed at the United States, not as a CBM toward Israel. Harrop's comment, however, created exactly this impression, which the Syrians resented. The Israelis did not

reciprocate, nor did the Likud make any use of Syria's change of heart in its election campaign, since soft rhetoric toward Syria at that juncture would have been in sharp contrast to the tough line previously presented by the Likud.

Syria did, however, send further signals. In the April 1992 talks, the Syrian negotiator said that when Syria referred to peace, it meant "peace with all its attributes," a locution that was designed to allay Israeli charges that Syria viewed peace as little more than a state of non-belligerency. In June 1992, an unofficial Syrian spokesman, Professor Muhammad Aziz Shukri of the University of Damascus Law School, publicly referred to Israel's legitimate security concerns,<sup>49</sup> and an unidentified member of the Syrian delegation indicated to an American journalist in Damascus that Syria was in favor of significant security arrangements with Israel.<sup>50</sup>

All this, interestingly enough, reflected Syrian wariness of a Labor victory. Candidate Yitzhak Rabin had publicly committed himself to reaching an agreement with the Palestinians within six to nine months of his election victory. At the same time, he was adamant that there could be no significant Israeli withdrawal on the Golan Heights. It seemed that despite everything that divided them, Shamir and Rabin agreed on their deep-seated suspicion of Assad and reluctance to consider territorial changes on the Golan Heights. Assad had reason to fear the prospects of a new Israeli government that would move swiftly ahead with the Palestinians, which would inevitably relieve any American pressure on Israel with regard to the Golan.

At any rate, by June 1992 Assad was fairly disappointed with the Bush administration's performance in the peace process. In the heady atmosphere of Madrid, Bush had seemed invincible, certain to stay in office for four more years. Six months later, his prospects were no longer assured. The administration's ability to help Syria was limited, particularly as public sentiment was by no means favorable to Assad's regime. At the same time, the Shamir government, which had resisted U.S. pressure on terms for loan guarantees to subsidize immigrant absorption, was hurting badly in the Israeli polls, and as a result, was even less likely to respond positively to U.S. pressures concerning the Golan. There was simply no logic in any such American pressure as Shamir, increasingly aware of his imminent electoral demise, did not want to leave the political arena with the image of a politician who had been ready to compromise on his fundamental convictions and still lose the election. Eager to do business with Yitzhak Rabin, Washington waited for Shamir's downfall, as did the Egyptians, whose dynamic ambassador in Israel, Muhammad Bassiouni, aggressively lobbied for a meaningful Israeli-Syrian dialogue. When Rabin became prime minister on July 13, 1992, he already knew that he could not simply nudge Syria off the political agenda.

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<sup>49</sup> Shukri spoke to The Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Policy Forum, July 30, 1992.

<sup>50</sup> The story was published in *Yediot Aharonot* by Larry Cohler, an American correspondent who visited Damascus. The author spoke with Cohler upon his return from Damascus, June 29, 1992.

## **SYRIAN-ISRAELI TALKS WITH THE RABIN GOVERNMENT**

Soon after his election victory, Cairo and Washington lectured Yitzhak Rabin that Syria was looking for a positive statement of his intentions. Rabin responded by appointing Israel's foremost authority on Syria, Professor Itamar Rabinovich, to be the chief Israeli negotiator with the Syrians and ambassador to the United States. Unlike Ben-Aharon, who was a tough ideologue, Rabinovich was a proven pragmatist who believed that a breakthrough with Syria was both vital and possible. When he met the Syrians for the first time in September 1992, he specifically outlined Israel's new policy: Resolution 242 was applicable to the Golan and Israel was ready for some undefined withdrawal in return for full peace.

At long last, the word "withdrawal," which the Likud delegation had dared not utter, was said loudly and clearly. This was a positive signal to the Syrians, in line with the formula of "land for peace." Damascus, of course, inferred the new Israeli policy to mean "all the land for peace," but the psychological effect of this shift was nonetheless significant.

Since then, the subject of negotiations has shifted from whether to make a deal at all to settling on the price. The atmosphere of the talks have greatly improved, and differences of opinion have somewhat narrowed. Nevertheless, the fundamental impasse endures.

The Syrians developed a new equation: "full peace for full withdrawal." The problem is that, while the definition of "full withdrawal" is quite clear, the definition of "full peace" remains ambiguous. Still, the use of the word "peace" has become a constant feature of Syrian diplomacy, indicating at least a change of tone. Virtually all visiting foreign correspondents have reported a positive change of attitude in Damascus, and the official Syrian press has emphasized Syria's commitment to the peace process; even Assad has changed the tenor of his public statements. Altogether it seemed that Syria was ready to negotiate on the basis of a new equation in which the elements of peace and withdrawal seemed to have equal significance.

These developments all reflected Assad's continuing attempts to adapt himself to changing circumstances; nonetheless, his scope of flexibility remains limited. He stuck to his demand for a complete withdrawal, refused to specify the precise meaning of "full peace," insisted on a linkage between all the tracks, continued to support terrorism in southern Lebanon, and rebuffed repeated Israeli calls for confidence-building measures. Assad carefully observed the Rabin government's performance and concluded that it was totally committed to the peace process, but he believed it would be unable to achieve any progress with a weak, fragmented Palestinian delegation. In his view, Rabin would have to move closer to Syria's position if he wanted to show any progress to his constituents in Israel and indeed salvage the entire process. In particular, Assad expected a change of heart in Israel over the key issues of the extent of the withdrawal and the substance of peace. Though Rabin persistently denied any willingness to vacate the Golan completely, even

in return for full peace, Assad believed that time was on his side, and thus no real incentive existed to make quick progress.

Nor did the Americans provide him with any incentive. The new Clinton administration maintained a very friendly relationship with the Rabin government and showed no desire to put pressure on Israel. Gone were the days of acrimonious verbal barbs and diplomatic incidents. Much to Assad's dismay, Washington accepted Israel's demand for a specific Syrian clarification about the substance of peace, and resented Syria's continued involvement in terrorism. Assad's reaction to all this was to slow the process down and wait for better circumstances—namely, a U.S. decision to become more actively involved in the process and a change in Rabin's attitudes.

The situation in Lebanon provided Assad with an opportunity to change this state of affairs. While there is no solid evidence that Syria provoked the flare-up in July 1993 between Israel and the Hezbollah in which the latter fired Katyusha rockets into northern Israel, it is unlikely that Hezbollah could have undertaken military operations without at least Syrian acquiescence, if not connivance. In the end, Syria intervened to aid American diplomatic efforts to seek an end to Israel's retaliatory Operation Accountability only when convinced that the Hariri government in Beirut was under unbearable pressure. At that point, the Syrians used their influence with Hezbollah and Iran to convince them that continuing the conflict presented more risks than opportunities. (The Syrians performed similarly in February 1992 during a previous round of hostilities in southern Lebanon, curtailing Hezbollah activities prior to an anticipated major Israeli assault.) In so doing, the Syrians helped themselves, because the possible downfall of Hariri could have greatly jeopardized their own position in Lebanon. Undoubtedly, the Syrians did not like the idea of getting involved in any collision with Israel. They also helped Rabin, insofar as the Israeli operation had met with little initial success, leading him to consider the nightmare scenario of a large-scale ground operation. Assad also proved to Washington that he could play a useful role when called upon to do so. Yitzhak Rabin went to great lengths to praise Syria's positive role, as did Israeli Chief of Staff Ehud Barak.<sup>51</sup>

The positive Israeli statements were meant as a specific message to Assad: in effect, "Keep your commitments in Lebanon, as you have since 1974 in the Golan, and we shall be able to tell our people we trust you." In fact, the Rabin government urged Assad to launch a number of confidence-building measures, the political rationale being that the skeptical Israeli public would not accept territorial changes in the Golan unless they were convinced of Syrian goodwill. Assad did not realize that the Israelis were desperate enough to lay similar bait at the doorstep of the Palestinians, believing instead that the prospects of an Israeli-Palestinian deal were remote and unrealistic. He may be proven wrong again if he continues to support Hezbollah activities in southern Lebanon in the belief that Israel will not repeat Operation Accountability, this time with possible repercussions for the Israeli-Syrian peace process. The Israeli leadership feels strongly that Assad could do more to subdue Hezbollah's activities and Israeli public opinion views the Syrian behavior as yet another indication of Syria's aggressive and uncompromising posture.

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<sup>51</sup> Likud politicians (mainly Shamir himself) took Barak to task for allegedly praising Syria and thus preparing the ground for the softening of Israel's policy toward peace.

## REPERCUSSIONS OF THE ISRAEL-PLO DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES (DOP)

The Israel-PLO Declaration of Principles caught Assad unprepared, as it did other players in the Middle East diplomatic game. For a shrewd veteran, Assad found himself in an embarrassing new situation, imposed upon him by someone he has genuinely loathed for decades, Yasser Arafat. While the element of personal humiliation cannot be overestimated, there was much more than mere personal offense. At stake was Assad's entire strategy during the peace process. His insistence on a comprehensive settlement was designed to prevent a repetition of Camp David, but Yasser Arafat, himself a victim of Camp David, did to Assad what Sadat had previously done. Ever the secretive and suspicious statesman, Assad had many reasons to feel betrayed and be worried. His most urgent task was to forge a coherent and credible response to the new challenge. The problem, as seen by Assad, was multi-faceted:

1. After Oslo, the Israelis were in no rush to conclude an agreement with Syria, and its leaders made public statements demanding that Syria first offer conciliatory gestures and CBMs. They singled out the situation in Lebanon as a possible litmus test of Assad's intentions.

2. Assad saw Israel's contention that its commitment to withdraw as outlined in the DOP depends on Palestinian behavior as a damaging precedent for any Israeli-Syrian agreement.

3. Assad was similarly concerned by the Israeli insistence that no settlements be dismantled in the West Bank and Gaza during the transition period. That, too, could set a precedent for Israeli settlements in the Golan.

4. The United States was not expected to put effective pressure on Israel to move in the Syrian track once the agreement with the PLO is achieved.

5. Other Arab states could follow the PLO's lead in pursuing separate deals with Israel, thereby leaving Syria isolated.

6. With billions of dollars pledged to the Palestinians, Syria feared being excluded from the economic windfall resulting from peacemaking. In sum, rather than being a key player in the process, Assad could very well find himself marginalized.

His initial reaction to all this was ambiguous. Assad made it clear that he did not support the DOP and would permit the operation of anti-Arafat groups headquartered in Damascus, but he fell short of threatening to thwart it.<sup>52</sup> Clearly, he needed time to evaluate the DOP's regional repercussions.

With the passage of several months after the euphoric DOP signing ceremony on the White House lawn on September 13, 1993, the Middle East looked very different. The situation on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza had deteriorated sharply, with signs that both Israeli and Palestinian public opinion had grown disenchanted with the DOP. An increase in Palestinian

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<sup>52</sup> Assad interview with Egyptian journalist Ibrahim Sa'adah, *Akhbar al-Yawm*, September 16, 1993.

terrorism against Israelis and the reactions of Israeli settlers further exacerbated the situation.

Islamic fundamentalists pose the main challenge to the agreement among the Palestinians, much more so than pro-Syrian rejectionists; while the Syrians may give verbal encouragement to Palestinian rejectionists, there is no clear evidence of increased Syrian material support for them. The same is true of Hezbollah activities in southern Lebanon, which continue unabated but generally within the understandings achieved at the end of Operation Accountability. Nor has there been any evidence since September 1993 of closer Syrian-Iranian cooperation in an attempt to revive a credible and effective rejectionist front. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Ahmad Jibril is rumored to have considered moving his headquarters from Damascus to Tehran.

In the Arab world, the general tone of the reactions to the DOP has been positive, but the peace train gathered less momentum than anticipated in the immediate aftermath of Oslo. Jordan has been reluctant to sign a formal peace treaty with Israel, and King Hussein has politely rebuffed American and Israeli calls to meet publicly with Israeli leaders (though he has held some secret *rendez-vous*). Lebanon, of course, has followed Syria's line. Morocco hosted Prime Minister Rabin, a step that did not provoke a negative Syrian reaction as it did in 1986, when Syria broke off diplomatic relations following Shimon Peres' visit to Rabat.<sup>53</sup> The reaction of the Gulf states, chief among them Saudi Arabia, has been lukewarm and cautious. There has also been no substantive change in the Arab boycott. Egypt gave its full backing to the DOP, and at the same time urged Israel and the United States not to neglect the Syrian-Israeli track. In sum, the DOP did not bring about a political earthquake, a possibility that frightened Assad just a few months ago.

U.S. policy has focused on mobilizing support for the Oslo accord, but not at the expense of its objective of a comprehensive settlement, i.e., continued Israeli-Syrian talks. Still, the U.S. definition of a "comprehensive settlement" differs from that of Syria, which opposes individual agreements between separate Arab parties and Israel. Nevertheless, Washington believes that the peace process will not be complete without agreements between Israel and *all* the relevant Arab parties.

The Rabin government also believes that there should ultimately be peace treaties between Israel and all the Arab parties, but sees the fulfillment of the DOP as its highest priority. This makes renewed emphasis on the Syrian track unlikely, because it could only further deepen political divisions within Israel. While an agreement between Israel and Jordan is both feasible and desirable because it will not arouse major debate in Israel, this is not the case with regard to Syria, given the emotive power of the territorial component of any deal. The Israeli government continues to adhere publicly to the principle of a "comprehensive settlement," but its inclination to act on that depends on the success or failure of the DOP.

For Assad, the key question is whether he is content to await the fate of the DOP—implementation or collapse—or will press his own negotiating track regardless of the DOP. The balance sheet of Assad's actions and statements since September 1993 indicates that he has decided not to withdraw from the peace process in protest of the secret Oslo deal, but rather to

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<sup>53</sup> MECS, 1986, p. 613.

redouble his efforts to improve relations with the United States, with the goal of securing U.S. help to achieve a comprehensive settlement.

To this end, Assad made two gestures that can be considered CBMs: first, he allowed a delegation from the U.S. Congress to visit Lebanon and Syria and collect data concerning the fate of Israeli MIAs. In the past, when the Syrians responded to Israeli queries concerning the issue, they did so only in secret. This time, they authorized Secretary of State Christopher to publicly announce their willingness to support the effort to locate the missing Israelis. Second, Syria announced its readiness to allow 800 more Jews to leave Syria during 1994, on top of the 2,700 granted permission to leave in April 1992.<sup>54</sup> In addition, Syria underscored its desire for dialogue with Washington, publicly announcing—in an unprecedented move—the necessity and desirability of a Clinton-Assad summit.

The meeting with Clinton on January 16, 1994, provided Assad with the opportunity he wanted to return to center stage. With hundreds of journalists covering the event, the tremendous media interest boosted Assad's efforts to regain the diplomatic initiative. The meeting, however, failed to create a breakthrough. By referring to the possibility of "normal peaceful relations" with Israel, Assad himself came closer than ever before to spelling out in public his vision of full peace, but it was Clinton—not Assad—who defined peace in the words Israelis most want to hear, i.e., diplomatic relations, trade, tourism, etc. The Syrian refusal to admit Israeli correspondents to the press conference left a bad impression in Israel and confirmed to many that Syria is more interested in improving ties with the United States than in making peace with Israel. On balance, the Geneva meeting helped propel the process forward but failed to achieve dramatic results. The peace talks resumed in Washington but made no rapid progress that could be attributed to Geneva. In Israel, Prime Minister Rabin announced his intention to hold a national referendum should the negotiators reach an agreement. While this was designed to signal to Damascus that Israel was now taking seriously the significant territorial concessions that would be necessary to reach a political agreement, it was equally meant to entice Syria to actively court domestic Israeli public opinion. Moreover, the referendum idea has the effect of insulating Rabin from any undue pressure to act precipitously to reach an agreement. The negotiations continue, but since the Syrians continue to refuse to upgrade the political level of the talks as Israel has requested, their prospects are unclear.

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<sup>54</sup> With the departure of these Jews, only a few hundred will remain. An old and historic Jewish community, whose tribulations in independent Syria became a rallying point for the entire Jewish world, will thus cease to exist.



## **THE SYRIAN-ISRAELI TALKS: THE FINAL STAGE**

All the parties involved in the peace process are closely watching the fortunes of the Israeli-PLO DOP. A relatively smooth process of implementation, or at least one perceived as such by the majority of the Israeli public, could greatly boost the prestige of the Rabin government and encourage it to proceed vigorously with the Syrian talks from a position of strength. If the implementation process founders, it is doubtful whether Rabin would have enough political backing in Israel to advance with Syria, a move that could be immensely unpopular in light of a failure with the Palestinians. While there might be some incentive for the government to try to salvage the entire peace process by initiating a move toward Syria, it is highly unlikely that Rabin would proceed with substantive negotiations with Syria from a position of weakness, at a time when public opinion in Israel was agitated due to the Palestinian situation.

Assad is also keeping a close eye on the DOP. A complete collapse could be a vindication of his initial objections and broaden his room to maneuver. But that would be worthwhile only if Rabin felt compelled to make a renewed effort to come to terms with Syria, something he is not likely to do. At the same time, Assad knows that successful implementation of the DOP could solidify Rabin's position and embolden him not to compromise in his own talks with Damascus. This could be mitigated, however, by U.S. and Egyptian pressure (which Rabin would find hard to resist in light of his formal commitment to a comprehensive settlement), pressure from Rabin's left-wing coalition partners, and the positive impact of a successful Israeli withdrawal on Israeli public opinion.

On balance, it is likely that Assad prefers to see a less worried Israeli leadership, one that can claim success with the PLO agreement. Hence, his commitment to Secretary Christopher in December 1993 not to torpedo the DOP. This is also consistent with the fact that at no point since September 1993 have the Syrians themselves undertaken actual activity against the DOP. The first half of 1994, during which the fate of the DOP will be clarified, will be a crucial period insofar as the future of Israeli-Syrian negotiations is concerned.

Until the future of the DOP is certain, there are several steps available to Syria to improve the atmosphere of its negotiations and increase the likelihood of success. Substantial progress in the search for Israeli MIAs, tighter control over Hezbollah actions in southern Lebanon, and restrictions on the activity of the Damascus-based Palestinian rejectionists are all feasible and not too costly. Damascus is unlikely, however, to provoke a total showdown with Hezbollah before it is sure of a successful agreement with Israel, or seek to improve its image with the Israeli public by inviting Israeli journalists or public figures (apart from Israeli Arabs) to Damascus. Syrian moves on any of these issues—particularly concerning MIAs—would have a dramatically positive effect on Israeli attitudes and are likely to be reciprocated by

authoritative recognition by Israeli leaders. In addition to these public moves, backchannel diplomacy can still play a major role. The Syrians persistently rejected Israeli pleas for the opening of such a channel. Precisely for this reason, it is imperative that they and Israel both tone down the level of critical public announcements and statements that cast a pall over the negotiations.

### **Parameters of a Possible Syrian-Israeli Agreement**

When the Israeli-Syrian negotiations resume in earnest, they will be based on a number of objective considerations. Syria's irreducible demands have always been the recognition of Syrian sovereignty over the Golan and total withdrawal of Israeli armed forces. Rabin's unyielding demand is for full peace, such as that outlined in the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, and he has always opposed total Israeli withdrawal. In recent months, however, Israeli officials have posed the equation differently, suggesting that the depth of any withdrawal ought to match the depth of peace. In an interview in October 1993, Rabin referred to Israeli withdrawal on the Golan Heights to secure and recognized boundaries in a firm statement: "The geographic depth will be dependent on what we will get in return in terms of peace."<sup>55</sup> Rabin himself has said on many occasions that the Camp David precedent is a major impediment for Israeli negotiations insofar as Assad cannot settle for less than Sadat, i.e., total withdrawal. Taken together, Israeli statements imply the possibility of some flexibility when it comes to withdrawal, but their long-standing demand for a full peace is not likely to change, and they also seek satisfaction on a number of other issues, such as the pace of Syrian-Israeli normalization, linkage with other negotiating tracks, the Lebanese question, the future of Israeli settlements, water resources, and the crucial issue of security arrangements.

Based on the official pronouncements of the two countries, as well as the margins of flexibility contained in each side's position, it is conceivable to imagine the contours and components of a Syrian-Israeli Declaration of Principles. It would begin with a preamble emphasizing that the agreement constitutes part of a comprehensive Middle East settlement comprised of Israeli-Palestinian, Israeli-Jordanian, Israeli-Syrian, and Israeli-Lebanese peace agreements (a formula that should meet Syrian insistence on the principle of comprehensiveness), and could include a section on economics that would make reference to the role of outside powers (the United States, European Union, Japan, etc.) in assisting the parties in implementing the agreement, which would serve as an important incentive to Damascus.

The core of the agreement would address at the outset two analytically distinct though related relationships: the relationship between sovereignty over the Golan Heights and full peace, and the relationship between withdrawal and normalization. This would be achieved via a simultaneous declaration in which Israel reaffirms Syrian sovereignty over the Golan and undertakes to redeploy its military forces to the international border, and Syria pledges its commitment to full peace, including full diplomatic and consular relations, the development of economic and trade relations, the end of the Arab boycott, and free movement of people and goods. Israel's redeployment and Syria's acceptance of aspects of normalization would proceed in parallel, simultaneous, and independent phases over a period of at least eight years.

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<sup>55</sup> *Mideast Mirror*, October 6, 1993.

This time span is longer than the three-year implementation process of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty and shorter than what many Israelis would like to see, given their fears for the stability and longevity of the Syrian regime after Assad. Eight years, however, should be enough time for Israel to assess the possible merits of a new relationship with Syria.<sup>56</sup>

The Syrians, for their part, are concerned that any phased withdrawal entails the risk of a change in Israel's government that might jeopardize its continued willingness to carry out the withdrawal. Syria will likely need firm guarantees, including from the United States, of Israel's commitment to implement withdrawal. Finally, Syria will find the bitter pill of normalization easier to swallow to the extent that an Israeli diplomatic presence in Damascus would be established only on completion of the withdrawal.

It is important to underscore the significance of a withdrawal to the international (i.e., Mandatory) border. From the 1948-49 War until the 1967 War, there was no clear and agreed demarcation of the Israeli-Syrian frontier. In other words, there is no "green line" on the Golan. Segments of those frontiers were congruent with the international border, while others, designated as demilitarized in the 1949 Syrian-Israeli armistice agreement, were the loci of steady friction and violent clashes until 1967.<sup>57</sup> An Israeli withdrawal to the international border would simultaneously satisfy Syria's demand for full Israeli withdrawal and allow the Rabin government to claim that it has lived up to its pledge not to return to the pre-June 1967 lines. This distinction would permit Israel to retain one of its most popular tourist attractions, the small enclave of Hamat Gader. While the amount of territory between the international and 1967 lines is not great, it does have significance that might make the arrangement palatable to the Israelis.

Special arrangements could be made to allow Israeli settlers who live in the Golan to continue living there for as long as they wish, consistent with the provisions of the agreement and the requisites of Syrian sovereignty. The fate of Jewish settlers in the Golan presents the Rabin government with profound moral and political dilemmas. During the 1992 election campaign Rabin made firm commitments to these settlers, many of whom are members and prominent activists of the Labor party. Moreover, Rabin wants to avoid a repetition of the traumatic forcible evacuation and dismantling of the Sinai settlements in 1982. He is therefore likely to insist on some options for the Golan settlers, including perhaps extraterritoriality, even though he believes that most of them will prefer to leave the Golan if required to live under Syrian sovereignty.

The water resources in the Golan are a subject of extreme sensitivity to Israelis and Syrians alike. Damascus still bears the traumatic memory of Turkey's stoppage of water supply to northern Syria in 1986,<sup>58</sup> and remembers

<sup>56</sup> These almost obsessive fears were worsened by the frail appearance of Assad in Geneva and much more so by the untimely death of Assad's eldest son and prospective heir apparent, Basil Assad. Basil's death should not affect Syria's policy in the peace process and there are no signs that it has. However, it may have injected an element of restiveness among the Syrian leadership around Hafez Assad. In Israel, at any rate, Basil's death sparked much press commentary regarding the stability and longevity of the Syrian regime, especially among hawkish politicians and commentators.

<sup>57</sup> Aryeh Shalev, *Israel and Syria: Peace and Security on the Golan* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1993), pp. 25-41.

<sup>58</sup> *MECS*, 1986, pp. 618-19; *MECS*, 1987, p. 650.

its water conflicts with Israel in the early 1960s. Israel, for its part, is highly dependent on extremely limited and vulnerable water supplies and fearful that returning the Golan to Syria would dramatically worsen its water situation. Consequently both parties will have to agree to joint supervision of the area's water resources for a period extending beyond the eight years of phased withdrawal, perhaps with third party participation. Reaching agreement on this could go far toward fostering goodwill on both sides.

The phased steps of withdrawal and normalization would of course be accompanied by the introduction of security arrangements that, like the water arrangements, would extend beyond the period of withdrawal and might have several components. Currently, Syria demands complete symmetry in security arrangements, particularly in the case of demilitarization. Clearly, Israel cannot possibly agree to demilitarizing large parts of its territory after withdrawing from the Golan Heights. The Syrians will have to demonstrate goodwill through the unilateral demilitarization of, or at least limitation of forces and weaponry on, most of the territory from the international border to the outskirts of Damascus. The Israelis, for their part, are likely to prefer that whatever foreign presence is stationed to monitor the evacuated territory be solely American, while the Syrians are likely to insist on an international force. Washington has yet to clarify its position with regard to the level of its involvement after withdrawal, although Secretary Christopher has referred to the option of deploying U.S. peacekeeping troops.

Requests by each party for arms reductions and disarmament can be expected but will be difficult to satisfy. Despite their DOP, each will still have military problems (for Israel: Iran, Iraq, and Libya; for Syria: Iraq and Turkey) to occupy their armed forces and provide a rationale for military acquisitions and the development of nonconventional weaponry. Syria will argue against an Israeli demand for partial demobilization of its armed forces and the termination of its ballistic missile program; so, too, will Israel likely refuse to incorporate its unconventional weapons within an arms limitation agreement. It seems, therefore, that even partial and mutual arms reduction will be difficult to achieve.

The element of mutuality in the implementation of security measures could be addressed with the establishment of early warning stations, manned by Israelis and Syrians, on each other's soil. Israel will give up its Mount Hermon installations only with difficulty, and will likely insist either on substitutes provided by the United States or on maintaining its presence on Mount Hermon for some period of time extending beyond withdrawal.

Consonant to the Israel-Syrian DOP, though not necessarily part of it, should be an Israel-Syria understanding concerning Lebanon. This could be predicated on three principles. First, Israeli troops would withdraw from the southern Lebanon security zone after effective steps are taken to eliminate terror activity, guarantee the personal safety and political rights of the members of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), and provide Israel with satisfaction regarding the fate of its MIAs. Second, a full-fledged peace between Israel and Lebanon would be established, identical to that with Egypt and Syria. Third, Israel would alter its demand for a total Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon in return for clearly defined Syrian guarantees to reduce its military presence and reconstitute what remains so that it would not pose any potential military threat to Israel.

The essence of these Lebanon understandings would be that Israel recognizes Syria's "special relationship" with Lebanon and Syria undertakes to

control the terror organizations in Lebanon, chiefly Hezbollah and the Palestinian rejectionists. It is conventional wisdom in Israel that Syria can control these organizations if it wishes to do so. That may reflect an inflated assessment of Syria's military capabilities and political will to risk a rift with Iran; however, the Syrians must recognize that once they achieve an agreement with Israel over the Golan Heights, it is in their utmost interest and not just Israel's to pacify Lebanon, even at the risk of an inevitable clash with Hezbollah's terrorists and a diplomatic showdown with Iran.

Taken together, these elements could constitute the basic components of an Israel-Syria DOP, based on the stated positions of each party. While neither side would achieve its maximal demands, no Israel-Syria negotiation would succeed without some amount of compromise. Given the political requirements of each of the antagonists, the formula of "sovereignty for peace, withdrawal for normalization" holds a reasonable hope of bridging the negotiating divide.

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