

Peace and the Syrian Dilemma

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Oct 28, 1996

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Brief Analysis

Two weeks ago, on the anniversary of the 1973 October War, Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas told an interviewer that it was a "Zionist fabrication" that "President al-Asad had an opportunity to regain the Golan but refused to do so." Tlas' remarks are only the most recent in a series of similar claims from Damascus. These Syrian protestations notwithstanding, since Binyamin Netanyahu's election in May it has become "common wisdom" that Hafiz al-Asad missed his chance for a peace treaty with Israel that would give him what he wants at a price he could accept. Asad's unwillingness to come to closure with the late Yitzhak Rabin and his successor, Shimon Peres, has seemed a puzzle to many outside observers, conjuring theories that Asad misunderstood the Israeli offer or believed it was a deception. The more logical and probable explanation, however, is that Asad balked because of Syria's competing foreign policy goals and his own inner demons. Asad and Syria are caught on the horns of a dilemma, and unless they find some way to reach a compromise among contradictory objectives, peace with Israel may be impossible regardless of the policies of the Israeli government.

The Left Horn: Lebanon. Asad's desire to rule Lebanon probably is second only to his control over Syria itself. Asad has made it clear that he believes Lebanon is an inseparable part of Syria, artificially cut off by the European powers after World War I. He points to the intertwining of the Syrian and Lebanese peoples, economically, culturally, and politically, to bolster his claims. Because of these links, Asad has always been convinced that events in Lebanon have a profound impact on events in Syria. Indeed, while experts disagree on his specific motives, there is a consensus that he invaded Lebanon in 1976 in large part because he feared that the instability there would inevitably contaminate Syria.

Syrian behavior since 1976 has demonstrated that Asad believes the only way he can guarantee his control over Lebanon is to keep sizeable military forces there. At present, there are roughly 30,000 Syrian troops in Lebanon, most in the north and the Biq'a valley. It may be that a heavy Syrian Mukhabarat (secret police) presence coupled with the constant threat of reoccupation would keep Lebanon under Asad's thumb even without Syrian troops, but for the last twenty years Asad has shown no willingness to take this chance.

For Asad to maintain troops in Lebanon, he requires the fig-leaf of Israeli occupation of south Lebanon. As long as the Israelis maintain forces in the security zone in south Lebanon, Syria can claim that its troops are intended to prevent Israel from further interfering in Lebanese affairs. If Israel were to withdraw from Lebanon, Asad would

come under tremendous pressure from the Arab world and the West to withdraw his own troops from Lebanon, pressure Asad almost certainly wants to avoid hence his swift dismissal of Likud's "Lebanon First" proposal over the summer.

The Right Horn: Ending Syrian Isolation. In his public statements and conversations with Westerners since the Gulf War, Asad has revealed that he also is determined to rid Syria of its pariah status and become an accepted member of the international community. The decline in oil prices in the 1980s and Syria's support for Iran against Iraq reduced the economic aid Damascus received from the Gulf oil monarchies. Likewise, the collapse of the USSR deprived Syria of its superpower protector, its supplier of inexpensive arms, and its other most important economic backer. Although Syria is managing at present, all indications are that Asad believes that over the long-term, Syrian prosperity requires the access to capital and integration into the global economy which only the West can provide. Thus Asad is determined to get on the right side of the United States and Europe so that he can end Syria's isolation and get off the "enemies list" of the only remaining superpower.

After the Gulf War, Asad reluctantly concluded that peace with Israel was the price he would have to pay for Western economic and political favor a point made clear to him by U.S. and European diplomats. Indeed, Asad's "strategic decision for peace" is evidenced not only by its constant reiteration both in public and private at every level of the Syrian government, but by numerous reports that he purged the Syrian military and intelligence services of those—including some of his most trusted henchmen who opposed making peace with Israel. In 1991, Asad agreed to the Madrid process as the most palatable means of making peace with Israel.

Thus Asad's dilemma: a peace treaty with Israel would lead to an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, undermining his position there; but only by signing a peace treaty with Israel will he be able to break out of his diplomatic isolation and secure the economic and political benefits he believes Syria requires.

Asad's Mindset: A Complicating Factor. Asad's personal idiosyncracies make it even more difficult for him to extricate Syria from its foreign policy conundrum. First, Asad is extremely cautious, often to the point of indecision. Throughout his career he has agonized over difficult choices. By and large, he has made major decisions such as his overthrow of Salah Jadid in 1971 and the invasion of Lebanon in 1976 only because he believed he had no other alternative. Most of the time such as during the Six-Day War, the 1970 Syrian invasion of Jordan, and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 he agonized, and ended up doing nothing or acting too late. Second, Asad is suspicious of everyone and everything. Of course, he is particularly paranoid where the security of his state (and his regime) are concerned. A treaty with Israel will undoubtedly require Asad to demobilize part of his armed forces, redeploy other elements, trust Israel not to launch a surprise attack, and rely on the United States to detect and prevent an Israeli attack. Thus from his point of view, making peace with Israel means ceding some control over Syria's security to Israel and the United States. This is a leap of faith Asad has yet to prove he is willing to take.

Finally, Asad's statements and actions have always indicated that he believes he cannot ignore the sentiments of the Syrian people on key issues such as peace with Israel. While outsiders may scoff at the idea that public opinion could bring down the dictator who butchered 20,000 at Hama in 1981, perhaps because of his minority status, Asad appears genuinely wary of incurring the wrath of the Syrian "man on the street." Consequently, he believes he must have the kind of peace the Syrian people will support. In his mind, this means regaining the entire Golan, agreeing to only the most minor infringements on Syrian sovereignty to meet Israeli security concerns, and signing an agreement which makes it clear that he got a better deal from Israel than Anwar Sadat got two decades ago.

Once and Future Deadlock. Viewed in the context of Syria's foreign policy dilemma and Asad's own pathologies, Damascus' failure to conclude a deal with Rabin is much less mysterious. The vociferous claims by senior Syrian officials over the last two months that they did not get a reasonable offer from Rabin are the surest sign that they did. But Asad could not bring himself to accept the proposal because he could not reconcile the competing priorities of

Lebanon and the peace process. Moreover, his inability to trust Syrian security to a peace treaty with Israel guaranteed by the United States, and his unwillingness to give Israel the security guarantees it needed, meant that Asad would not accept any peace treaty that would be acceptable to Israel. Unwilling to choose among these various alternatives, Asad agonized until it was too late and Rabin's offer was rescinded by Netanyahu.

In the future, there is no reason to believe that Asad's approach to the peace process will be anything other than peripatetic. There are no signs that he has reconciled Syrian foreign policy goals, nor has he surmounted his own foibles. Ultimately, this does not bode well for the Syria track, regardless of who is in charge in Israel. Asad probably will continue to try to have his cake and eat it too, and refuse to decide among his less than perfect choices. The result will be constant frustrations for both sides and a high risk of Syrian-inspired violence (probably through Lebanese proxies) to remind the Israelis that Syria cannot be ignored. Even if Asad were to find some way to reconcile his competing foreign policy objectives, there is little reason to believe he can master his own fears and commit to a workable peace with Israel one that would provide adequate guarantees for Israel's safety anytime soon. Whether Israel is led by Peres, Netanyahu, or a new Rabin, as far as the Syria track goes, it seems like we are in for *deja vu* all over again.

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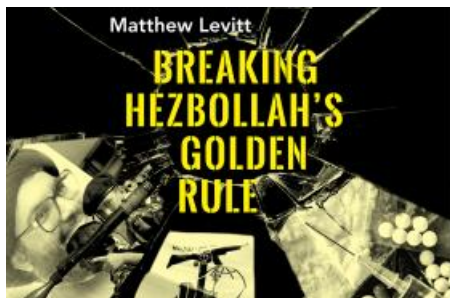
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