An Insider's View of How Rabin Almost Made Peace With Syria

by David Makovsky **(/experts/david-makovsky)**

May 14, 2017

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Makovsky (/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.

Articles & Testimony

A review of a new book by Itamar Rabinovich, the late prime minister's ambassador to Washington, who details why Rabin preferred peace with Assad over the Palestinians.

As a journalist who covered Yitzhak Rabin during his second tenure as prime minister between 1992 and 1995, I found he was most relaxed when he was most analytical. It was when he sat at the Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv that he felt most at home – both as prime and defense minister. I would interview him many times there, and he was far more at ease than when he was at the Prime Minister's office in Jerusalem and could hear protesters not far from his window. He would light up a cigarette and begin talking about trends in the Middle East, often flicking his wrist as he distinguished between what he deemed to be strategic change versus tactical shifts. If you asked Rabin the right question, he would not hold back. He lacked guile and was proud of his unvarnished candor.

What was so striking about Rabin is how animated he became when he spoke about the Middle East. Rabin was most proud of his analysis, and how his policy would stem from that analysis. Rabin's public credibility existed not just because he was the veteran Israel Defense Forces chief of staff who won the 1967 war and spent many years as defense minister. Rather, it was because the public trusted the intellectual honesty Rabin conveyed. You could disagree with Rabin – as so many certainly did in the Oslo years – but you knew where he stood and believed he honestly thought he was doing what was best for the country. Rabin was committed to telling his public, as he often did in an unambiguous fashion, that the status quo was harming Israel, and it needed to be addressed.

To be sure, Rabin led Israel at a time of seismic global change. The Cold War had just ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, ending the massive arming of Damascus at that time. The United States, Israel's patron, won the Gulf War against Iraq, dealing a blow to Arab radicalism. Around the same time, Israel welcomed a wave of highly educated immigrants from the former Soviet Union. This was the time for Israel's leading thinker to seize on the strategic change, both in the region and internationally. Rabin sought to convince Israelis that a combination of peace

agreements, military strength, better relations with the U.S. and economic renewal were better for Israel's security than more settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. He wanted to convince them that Israel had the opportunity to secure a more integrated place in the Mideast by making some painful concessions.

Itamar Rabinovich's new biography, *Yitzhak Rabin: Soldier, Leader, Statesman,* is a one-volume political profile that is key to understanding the personal trajectory of this seminal Israeli figure. It is a book spanning Rabin's life, largely focusing on his military and political career. The book explores Rabin's relationship with key figures of Israel's pantheon like Ben-Gurion, Dayan and, of course, his endless, famous rivalry with Shimon Peres.

Rabinovich was Rabin's ambassador to Washington and his chief negotiator with Syria. His centrism very much reflected Rabin's. His portrait of Rabin includes interviews with many of those who worked closely with him, other archival, primary sources and, of course, the secondary literature. He also gained access to transcripts of dozens of interviews and speeches that Rabin gave.

All this enabled Rabinovich to delve deep into some of the more mystifying elements of Rabin's career, including his emotional state on the eve of 1967 war when he was IDF chief of staff, with all the pressure that entailed, particularly in the absence of a full-time defense minister. Rabinovich's conclusion, based on interviews with those familiar with the episode, was that Rabin suffered from "physical exhaustion and acute anxiety" but not a nervous breakdown as critics have alleged.

Rabinovich's book also adds to our understanding of Rabin at a critical moment of his second premiership. Crucially, Rabin had to decide whether to remain on the Syrian diplomatic track and abandon the secret Oslo channel or vice versa. On one hand, he thought there was value in pursuing both tracks simultaneously, believing it could create leverage for Israel. Yet he also knew that two breakthroughs could overload the political circuits in Israel.

Rabinovich, who was present at the pivotal meetings where Rabin was pressed to choose one track, describes how this all came to a head in August 1993. U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher was pressing for a breakthrough with Damascus. For Rabin, the regional strategist, a breakthrough with Syria was ideal. Shorn of its Soviet patron, a deal with Damascus could peel Syria away from Iran, while also potentially cutting it off from its proxy, Hezbollah. Syria was a centralized state that had gone to war with Israel three times. Peace with Damascus was viewed as a potential strategic bonanza.

The Palestinian issue was far messier. Rabin felt that, despite the intifada, the Palestinians did not pose a conventional military threat to Israel in the same way that Syria did. Moreover, focusing on the West Bank would mean a head-on collision with the settler movement. In contrast, there were relatively few (and largely secular) settlers on the Golan. What makes Rabinovich's account of August 1993 so intriguing is that it is clear Rabin's regional assessment was not sufficient for his own decision-making: Rabin didn't just need to decide if a deal made strategic sense for Israel; he needed Syria to demonstrate to the Israeli public that it genuinely wanted peace.

According to Rabinovich's account, Rabin was repeatedly disappointed in '93 that Assad was oblivious to the public diplomacy necessary to frame any breakthrough in negotiations to the Israeli people. While drawn to the regional value of a Syrian breakthrough, Rabin had to account for his own ability to deliver.

At the same time, Rabin was concerned that his government could collapse, due to a looming crisis involving the likely indictment of Shas minister Aryeh Deri for corruption, which would trigger the exodus of the Shas party from the coalition. Always believing he could make one big breakthrough, Rabin thought the time for decisions was imminent.

Despite months of talks at Oslo, on August 3, 1993, Rabin made it clear to Christopher that his preference was for a breakthrough with Syria. Rabinovich recounts how he played his ultimate card, telling Christopher that if Hafez al-Assad would satisfy Israel's demands on a range of issues (security, water and normalization), Israel would fully

withdraw from the Golan over five years. Rabin wanted to prove to the Israeli public that he would achieve full normalization with Syria, including an exchange of embassies early in the withdrawal process. Rabin made clear he was making the territorial concession to Christopher and not Assad, and called it the "deposit."

Here Rabinovich, historian, practitioner and confidant, realizes he has just witnessed something potentially historic. "As we made the short walk from Rabin's office to the conference room in which Rabin's and Christopher's aides were impatiently waiting, I said to [American counterpart Dennis] Ross that I could hear the winds of history in the room. I knew Rabin had just given Christopher the keys to an Israeli-Syrian peace."

According to Rabinovich, in the follow-up meeting upon Christopher's return from Damascus on August 5, Rabin expressed disappointment with Assad's lack of alacrity in seizing upon his offer, and felt Christopher was too revealing of the "deposit" to Assad. Rabinovich says the U.S. saw the Assad response as supportive of the Rabin offer, and put forward a counter-offer that was just the beginning of the negotiation. Rabinovich seems disheartened the U.S. didn't engage in more urgent diplomacy; instead, Christopher went on vacation.

However, it may be unfair to blame the Americans. It's likely Rabin did not convey his desire for an accelerated timetable to the Americans. They seemed to know about the competing secret Oslo track in general terms, but may not have realized that he wanted a breakthrough that month, or could risk a collapse of his government. Rabin may not have wanted to share his sense of urgency with the U.S. believing it was too politically sensitive.

With a Syria deal off the table, Rabin returned his attention to the Palestinians. The advantage to a breakthrough with the Palestinians, Rabinovich points out, was that, "it was an interim agreement, and the toughest decisions could be delayed for five years. In a deal with Syria, the most painful choices [committing to a full withdrawal from the Golan] would have to be made up front. Rabin ended up deciding to give the green light to conclude the Oslo negotiations and forsook a Syrian track."

Rabin dispelled the notion that if you are weak, you cannot afford to compromise, and if you are strong, you do not need to compromise. As Israel's "Mr. Security," Rabin believed that Israel was strong and could negotiate from a position of strength. The destinies of the Israelis and the Palestinians would be separated, and this motif would be more dominant than the theme of reconciliation. It would be a soldier's peace – without illusions. He believed it was unhealthy for Israeli decision-making to be held hostage by perpetual gridlock. After all, Zionism came about because the Jews were committed to transforming their predicament and refused to be paralyzed. Rabin may have lacked the charisma of other leaders, but as the famed novelist Amos Oz said of him: "By being a careful engineer and a precise navigator, his personality embodied the spirit of new Israel, a country seeking not redemption but solutions."

Rabin understood that the moral authority of leadership could be strongest at home and abroad when Israel exhausted every avenue for peace, using war only as the last resort. As a journalist who interviewed him countless times, I remember him often saying how important it was for him to be able look into the eyes of mothers and tell them he had tried all options before sending their sons into battle. For him, Israel's public resilience was tied to the moral authority of its cause.

He defined leadership not just as saying tough things to outsiders, but to his own public. He felt it was important to preserve Israel's character as a nation-state of the Jewish people and as a democracy.

For Rabin and his fellow Israelis, Oslo shook the country to the core. Many were thrilled and viewed Oslo as the ticket to being a normal Western country that Israelis craved. Yet, for Rabin's critics, Oslo was perfidy. A societal chasm emerged, and the trajectory was clear. Israel would be yielding biblical patrimony. For the critics, the move was not just misguided but illegitimate. Tragically, Rabin would pay the ultimate price.

Rabinovich's account is an important reminder of the role of leaders can play in rising to the occasion in making

historic decisions, especially at a time when people believe decisions are too momentous for any single leader to even consider – let alone make.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Project on the Middle East Process. This review was originally published on the ***Haaretz website (http://www.haaretz.com/life/books/.premium-1.788783)*** *.* ❖

Haaretz

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)