

Syria-Lebanon-Israel Triangle:

The End of the Status Quo?

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In-Depth Reports

***M**r. Lubrani's remarks represent his own views and not those of the government of Israel.

Robert Satloff, The Washington Institute: Mr. Seale, you wrote an obituary for the Syria-Israel peace track. Is this track indeed dead? If so, why? And if not, why not?

Patrick Seale: First, I would like to thank The Washington Institute for inviting me here. In a way, I am a voice from the "other side of the divide." I take it as an indication that the Institute is, more than ever, ready to listen to voices that do not entirely agree with the policies it has been advocating. The Institute has done a tremendous job expounding Israeli policies, influencing American opinion in favor of Israel, and preaching the essence of Israeli and American interests.

There is a new reality in the region. The time when Israel could impose its terms on a defeated or embattled Arab world is over, and Israel has to think in terms of coexistence with its neighbors rather than in terms of domination. The Institute, which has played such an important role in the past, can if it adjusts to these ideas play a very valuable role. Inviting me to speak is an indication that the Institute is moving in that direction.

For the moment, barring a last-minute initiative, the track is dead. The Egyptians and the Omanis tried to cobble together some last-minute compromise. The timetable for withdrawal from Lebanon is set with only a few days to go. Such an initiative could possibly delay an Israeli withdrawal, but the track still does not look too hopeful.

The good news, however, is that Israel's political and military leaders have understood that holding the Golan Heights and the Golan settlements is no contribution to Israeli security. The real threat is further to the east and, therefore, the decision to give up the Golan has already been made by Yitzak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Ehud Barak. Yet, no decision was ever made to give up the Golan as a whole. The track broke down over the last few hundred meters of the Golan. Strategic assessments will endure and so, perhaps under a new American administration, negotiations will resume. Withdrawal from Lebanon will create a new reality, and people will have to deal with that new, unpredictable situation. The effects of the future of these talks remain undetermined.

The immediate short-term reason for the breakdown of the talks was a dispute over borders and water, two linked issues. Israel wants exclusive control over Lake Tiberias and the surrounding shoreline and roadway. It wants total access to and total control over the waters that flow into the lake from the upper Jordan River and other streams. The Syrians want access to the lake because they were on the northeastern corner of the lake in 1967. They also want to share the water that flows into the lake from the upper Jordan, Banyas Spring, and other streams. Essentially, this is the immediate reason for the breakdown of the talks.

The 1923 international frontier, drawn by Britain and France, put the lake firmly inside Palestine. The line runs ten meters from the northeastern shoreline of the lake, but this proved unworkable because there were a number of small Syrian villages there.

In 1926, the British and the French completed a good-neighbor agreement whereby people in that area could have access to the water through a pier that was built. From the 1920s on, the Syrians fished and swam in the lake. The Syrians considered the shoreline theirs and few of them recognized the 1923 international frontier; they said the line was drawn by imperial powers and independent Syria had nothing to do with it. The Syrians wanted the line that prevailed after 1926 and before the 1967 war with Israel to be their frontier. Before the war, the Syrians were on the upper Jordan River and on the northeastern corner of the lake. They did not want to take water from the lake, but instead wanted access to the lake for fishing and swimming; the Syrians wanted to share the water that flows into the lake according to the rules of international law that protect the rights of upstream and downstream states. Barak could not accept those terms and was simply unwilling to recognize the "June 4 [1967] line" and Syria's presence on the shoreline of the lake. He wanted to push back the 1923 line several hundred meters eastward, thereby giving Israel total control of the road that ran around the lake. The Syrians found this unacceptable.

Yet, there remain underlying and perhaps even more fundamental reasons for the failure to reach an agreement. One is a difference in negotiating styles. When Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak came to power, he made it very clear that he wanted a summit in which he, Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad, and U.S. president Bill Clinton would thrash out a big political deal and that would be the end to the conflict. He said, "If we could be locked up in a room for a couple of hours together, we could do a big deal, with tradeoffs."

That is completely contradictory to the way Asad negotiates. Asad has a long history and much experience in these negotiations. He is very meticulous and believes that the three leaders themselves should only appear on the scene at the end of the negotiations. Asad believes that the Palestinians made a critical mistake in their negotiations by deferring major issues until later decisions that were then left to Israeli goodwill. Asad's position of negotiation is to go point by point and step by step. He puts aside a point as soon as it is settled and then moves on to the next one in a very meticulous, careful way.

He also does not believe in gestures or public diplomacy. He believes each leader should be responsible for his own public opinion and does not see it as Syria's responsibility to effect a greater Israeli public opinion in favor of peace. There are simply fundamental differences of style here between the two leaders.

Satloff: Daniel, is the Syria track dead? Was it ever alive?

Daniel Pipes: Mr. Seale wrote his obituary of the Syria track in early May 2000. I published mine in the Christian Science Monitor in mid-December 1999, just a week after the meeting at the White House. My obituary at that time was not based on diplomacy, a few meetings in Washington, or the charming thought of the Syrians wanting to fish and swim in the Kinneret. Rather, it was based on far more basic facts of life.

Any regime or government looks first to its own domestic issues. Its foreign policy is only a reflection of these domestic issues. Therefore, to understand Syrian foreign policy, one must understand Syrian domestic policy. The basic fact of Syrian political life is that, since 1966, a small and historically despised minority called the Alawis has run the government. It is a post-Islamic religion with an intricate and interesting story. Living in the far northeast of the country, the Alawis represent approximately one-eighth of the Syrian population.

For a variety of reasons, an extraordinary development took place in 1966 by which the Alawis took over the government of Syria. The first few years were a bit rocky. Hafiz al-Asad took over from other Alawis in 1970, and he has now been there for thirty years. Asad's main concern is to maintain his rule and the rule of the Alawis in Syria. He fears that should he and the Alawis lose power, there would be some terrible consequences not just like Ceausescu's demise, but the entire Alawi people would suffer. Therefore, the absolute priority for him is regime maintenance in order to stay in power; everything that the regime does is seen through this prism.

From that point of view, one can understand Syrian foreign policy and domestic policy. Looking to relations with

Israel, the Asad regime in 1991 saw the writing on the wall the American victory over Iraq and the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union. The government decided to make some policy changes by starting a negotiating track with the Israelis, thereby hoping to assuage the Western powers. They were successful in implementing this substantial change in policy, and there was a certain optimism that resulted. Yet, it became increasingly clear that the Syrians were using the peace process as an end in itself a means by which to curry favor with the West. They really never intended to reach an agreement. Essentially, Asad wanted a peace process, not peace. And the result has been negotiations for eight-and-a-half years.

Despite the many theoretical agreements that resulted after all these years of continuous talk, nothing concrete has been achieved on the Syrian-Israeli track. Every time there is an agreement, the Syrians come up with a new demand. For instance, there was a great sense of excitement in June 1996 about an imminent breakthrough, and then suddenly the Syrians decided that the Israelis, in advance, had to give up an early-warning station on the Golan Heights. In the early part of 2000, the Israelis made the extraordinary concession of agreeing to hand over the Golan Heights. Suddenly, then, the Kinneret comes into play. If the Israelis give in on the Kinneret, the next demand would be even more outrageous. It is simply impossible to please the Damascene government.

Essentially, Hafiz al-Asad is a man who will not take "yes" for an answer. He does not want "yes," because a signed peace treaty with Israel is something much larger than a technical agreement with a neighbor. It is a reorientation of the Syrian regime a moving out of the rogue camp and toward the West.

This is very similar to Anwar Sadats decision to throw out the Soviet military advisors in 1972. That was not a military decision, but rather a technical decision having to do with the military. It was a reorientation of his regime from East to West. To the populace of Syria, a peace treaty with Israel would represent a fundamental shift to a more open society. Syria would have to be willing to have political participation, foreign investments, and an increasing sensitivity to the human rights groups that would be monitoring its regime.

Asad, who is always concerned with regime maintenance, looks at this possibility with horror. This is the man who has ruled a country for thirty years with considerable success and a totalitarian grip. The prospect of this kind of an opening a prospect with which he does not know how to deal scares him immeasurably. There is no way Asad is going to go through with such an agreement, but he will have to continue the negotiations. In sum, these talks are only a show and will never be serious as long as Hafiz al-Asad is in power. What follows remains undetermined.

Satloff: Raghida, which of these two points of view is the right one?

Raghida Dergham: As some have suggested, the Syrian-Israeli track is not dead and is, in fact, still kicking. At this stage, it very much depends on the extent of the need by either side to arrive at a breakthrough. If a breakthrough does not occur, both parties may simply go back to the process or opt to just wait in a kind of "so be it" diplomacy. There is no harm in waiting, and it depends on both sides. Yet, this option is also dangerous; even Israel and its supporters question the entire foundation of the peace process so long as Hafiz al-Asad remains in power.

The middle of June will be an important time in terms of the future of the peace process. It is then that the United Nations goes ahead with Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426 and the plan for Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon. The line of withdrawal will be clearer at that time, and any developments in the region will remain undetermined until then.

Also, there is the very important meeting of the Bath Party regional command, which will be taking place in Damascus. At this meeting, they will be electing, among others, the son of President Asad, Dr. Bashar al-Asad, to an important political position. The Syrians are setting up a process to bring about the fundamental changes that Dr. Bashar al-Asad has himself said were necessary in Syria. They are admitting now that things are very bad, and that Syria needs to improve in order to survive in this world. The Syrians are keeping the window open to the possibility

of resuming of the negotiations.

Mr. Seale mentioned several interlocutors many Saudis, the United Nations, and the Europeans. For example, Mr. Peter Hain, the British minister of state was only last week in Damascus. He said that he went into the meeting with both the foreign minister and Bashar al-Asad quite pessimistic and came back out optimistic. The British say that it is not like the Arabs, "insha Allah, insha Allah," but there is more to it. There have been quite a number of signals being sent out by Syria, particularly by President Asads son, who met, for example, with Azmi Bishara, an Arab member of the Israeli Knesset. The Syrians are throwing out something for the people who want to bring the process back on the right track, hopefully toward a conclusion. It is certainly not dead; the dysfunctional relationship between the Syrians and the Israelis, along with the disconnection between the U.S. administration and Syria, are a continuous source of concern. There is a fundamental misunderstanding regarding the Geneva failure, but American contributions to the breakdown are also worth taking into account.

The withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon is imminent. Much depends on what Israel does with its proxy, the South Lebanon Army (SLA), as it withdraws. If it leaves any pockets there, the decision will come back to haunt Israel; the SLA is Israels responsibility. Exactly which land will be included in the tactical line of withdrawal must be addressed, but this is not solely an Israeli problem. Rather, it is a Syrian, Lebanese, and Israeli problem collectively. The SLA is different and is uniquely an Israeli problem.

Satloff: Uri, which assessment do you agree with? Were these peace talks just a few hundred meters from success? Alternatively, was it really just a show for all these years? Or do you see things from a different angle?

Uri Lubrani: It is very difficult to read what is happening in Syria. Asad failed, very simply, because the Israeli government has been very forthcoming in trying to reach an agreement with Syria. Public opinion in Israel has been changing over the last two or three months. Many people who would have been readily willing to accept a deal involving the Golan, hoping that this might enhance a comprehensive peace, would now vote against the very same deal.

The way the Syrians handled these negotiations manifested a clear misunderstanding of the Israeli psyche, Israeli public opinion, Israeli needs, wants, and so forth. Israeli public opinion is the major factor in any Israeli governments decisions, and Syria failed to handle the situation appropriately. Any Israeli who went to Damascus was encouraged to try to find a way to explain Syrias case to the Israeli public. Azmi Bishara is not a classical representative of Israeli public opinion. Also, the constant diatribes diatribes of a very sinister nature present a significant problem.

Negotiations will resume, but the exact timeframe remains undetermined. They will certainly not restart before Israel pulls out its troops from Lebanon. Furthermore, we may be looking at an extended timeframe that depends on the health of Asad and the strength of the regime that succeeds him. His eventual successor may feel self-confident. But both sides need strong public support. No government, be it Israeli or Syrian, can resume negotiations without it.

Satloff: Many issues have been raised so far issues of territory, leadership, public opinion, the role of the United States in this peace track, and the potential for Israeli-Syrian confrontation in the absence of Israeli-Syrian negotiations, especially over Lebanon. The idea that Asad simply failed seems to be increasing in popularity in Israel, the United States, and even in the Arab world. Negotiations with Barak have remained unfruitful, and many people now subscribe to the idea that Asads chances for peace are slim: "If he cant make it there with Barak hes not going to make it anywhere." After all the deposits made, and the discussion about withdrawal from the Golan, why is it that a couple of hundred meters kept Asad away from peace with America, peace with the world, billions of dollars in investments, and the rescue of his crumbling economy?

Seale: First, the negotiations that took place in the 1990s were extremely serious and detailed, and they produced

some considerable achievements. The idea that nothing was achieved that it was all continuous talk, that Asad was simply concerned with regime stability and that he was interested in the process, not in peace is simply inaccurate. The two big achievements of the 1992-1996 period of negotiations under Rabin and Peres were cast in stone, and they are the two fundamental pillars of the Syrian negotiating position.

The peace process started in 1991 at Madrid. Nothing happened, and the Syrians refused to tackle any substantive issues until they got a conditional commitment from the Israelis to withdraw to the June 4 line. Asad's whole position was that, until the Israelis conceded that they would give back Syrian territory, he would refuse to enter into negotiations on the other elements of the peace package, including security, normalization, the timetable, and interfacing. In 1994, Rabin finally committed that he was prepared to withdraw to the June 4 line, provided that Israel's security and normalization needs were met. He made this commitment to both the Americans and the Syrians. When Rabin was assassinated, Peres endorsed that commitment; this is very clear.

Once Rabin and the Israelis made the formal commitment, the documents were no longer hypothetical. It became clear; the Syrians were then concerned about what Israel might ask as a quid pro quo. Israel had made the commitment to withdraw to the June 4 line, but it had not made definitive security demands. Asad went to great lengths to ensure an Israeli agreement with a paper entitled, "The Aims and Principles of Security Arrangements." The Israelis wanted considerable security advantages in exchange for their commitment to withdraw. Asad was anxious to limit those advantages, and so, in the paper, he delineated the necessary steps: The Syrians and Israelis should be equal, mutual, and reciprocal on either side, with some small adjustments for geography. The paper also states that the security of one side should not be at the expense of the security of the other. This was a fundamental understanding for Asad, and this paper was lodged with the State Department and brokered by the United States, which then helped to draft it in the form of an agreement. Secretary of State Warren Christopher came to the region several times and received an assent to the agreement from both parties. These two principles—full withdrawal from the June 4 line and "The Aims and the Principles of Security Arrangements" paper—were the two great achievements of that period.

Asad welcomed Barak when he came to power, perhaps because Barak had said that Syria was the "keystone" of peace. Barak, who says that he is walking in Rabin's footsteps, also praised Asad as the founder of modern Syria. Asad believed in Barak's agreement with the two fundamental achievements of the previous period. But this was followed by a great disappointment. Barak wanted to renegotiate the two points and did not want to accept the June 4 line concerning Lake Tiberias. He wanted to renegotiate the security paper so that Israel would have a presence on Mount Hermon, an early-warning station that the Americans could not provide. Satellites, aerial surveillance, and side-looking radar were not enough for the Israelis; they wanted a say in the Syrian order of battle, the location of Syrian ammunition, and the dumps for their fuel. That Barak attempted to renegotiate these two fundamental questions was a huge disappointment for the Syrians. They realized that they were not going to strike a deal with him, and so the entire peace process broke down.

Another fundamental and complicated issue that has not been dealt with is the Israeli mentality that they are stronger and more militarily capable than the Syrians. Because they see themselves as the victors, the Israelis insist that the Syrians must acquiesce in the loss of territory. Asad views things completely differently. He wants a negotiation between equals, and he wants a peace that is not dependent on Israeli power alone. He wants a peace based on some sort of balance of power, mutual deterrence, equality of treatment, and equality of security arrangements. Israel's strategic doctrine has not yet adapted to this new reality, and this presents a fundamental sort of difficulty.

Asad has wanted peace since the mid-1970s; he even said so then. Asad thought Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was going to deliver peace, and his great disappointment was that Kissinger was only interested in taking Egypt out

of the equation. Asad was firmly convinced that Syrian interests would be addressed, that Israel would withdraw from the occupied territories, and that there would be peace. Convinced that President George Bush and his secretary of state, James Baker, really intended to bring about peace, Asad joined the Madrid Conference. It was their pledge that brought him there. At the time, Israel gave lip service to the notion of peace with Syria. Rabin said that he wanted it, but over time he went after a separate deal with the Palestinians, and then another deal with Jordan. Syria was kicked to the back of the queue.

Asad does not lack the desire for peace; his grievance is that his interests in peace have not been addressed. He wants peace badly; he has wanted it all these years and still wants it. Asad has shown a great deal of flexibility on every issue except that of territory. Syria has made tremendous concessions on normalization it has agreed on the joint water board and has agreed that the Hermon early-warning station should remain for a number of years under U.S. and French control. Syria has demonstrated great flexibility, but not on territory. For Asad, the Golan is a symbol of Syrian sovereignty and independence, and so he refuses to give back an inch. Barak was ill-advised in the meeting when he was told that Asad could be pressured into giving up those few hundred yards around the lake.

Pipes: When Warren Christopher went to Damascus twenty-six times, he did achieve certain theoretical agreements. Yet, almost nine years later, nothing has happened. There is simply no finality. Theoretical agreements on principle do not matter when there are no real agreements. The Syrian regime wants these things to go on endlessly with theoretical agreements that go nowhere.

The notion that the Israelis are arrogant toward the Syrians seems to ignore the basic rules of military victory. There was a war in 1967, and in that war the Israelis won and the Syrians lost. There are certain facts that follow from winning a war and losing a war. Since the war, the Israelis have made it clear that in theory, they will return some or all of the lands they won in return for something they get back. That something that they get back is assurance that those former enemy states will no longer attack them, specifically in the case of Syria. Syria can potentially get back some or all of the territories it lost in return for assuring the Israelis that it is not going to attack Israel again. The Israelis are the judges of this, and the Syrians are the petitioners. The Israelis need to be convinced that this ugly totalitarian regime will not once again use the Golan Heights and other parts of its territory to launch an attack. That is the pure and simple basis of the Israeli position.

What is extraordinary is the way in which the Syrians have managed to present themselves as the aggrieved party the party that needs to be convinced and given assurances. The Israelis have been all too accommodating. At the White House meeting in December 1999, the key politician of Israel the elected prime minister met with the foreign minister of a totalitarian regime that has absolutely no power to dictate its position. Israel is trying its very best to take the extra steps necessary to meet the Syrians, and the Syrians responded by arrogantly sending their foreign minister, Faruq al-Shara. When each side gave a talk on the White House lawn, the Israeli spoke about mothers, peace, and so forth, while the Syrian presented a long list of grievances. Just yesterday, Ephraim Sneh said that it is not a good idea for Israel to be leaving Lebanon, but that it is leaving anyway because it does not have the staying power. Israel is not an aggressive state; it is a weak state. Israel is a state that although it has great economic and military power does not have the morale to go on fighting. This exit from Lebanon and the willingness of Barak to meet with al-Shara in December stem from this weakness.

The term "peace," in this context, is useless. Everybody wants peace even the Nazis wanted peace, after all. The question is, On what terms? What are the specifics? Asad did not want that peace treaty in the 1970s. And there has been no sign that the president of Syria currently wishes to have a signed agreement with Israel; the proof is in the pudding. For years, the Israelis have been offering 96 percent, 97 percent of the Golan Heights. Now they are up to 99 percent and are being told that it has to be 100 percent or their offer is worthless. Offering 100 percent to the Syrians would allow Israel to call Asad's bluff.

Satloff: Uri, if peace is such a strategic advantage for Israel, if it will open up the doors to the Arab world, and the world at large, should these 200 meters stand in the way of ending the Arab-Israeli conflict and achieving comprehensive peace? Where is Israeli public opinion on this issue?

Lubrani: First of all, it is not only a matter of 200 meters, although 200 meters is certainly substantive. It is rather a matter of with whom one chooses to make peace. Assad has a very difficult job persuading the Israelis that he really wants peace. So far, he has done a very poor job, and Assad is very fortunate in having Patrick Seale as his spokesman. But the current situation is the most complicated of what has transpired up to now. There was a point at which Assad had to decide whether or not to open up Syria. A peace treaty with Israel is not simply signing on the dotted line and having 200 meters here or there. He will have to open up Syria to the crosswinds of change, new ideas, and intercourse of all sorts. Syria, a country that has been closed to ideas and modern technologies for thirty-five to forty years, will have to change. A good friend said that he met a Syrian professor and asked him how they teach sciences. This professor said, "We do not teach sciences; we teach the history of sciences, because our books come from the 1950s and the 1960s." Syria has to deal with its own future, its destiny.

Asad knows that if he opens up, Syria will change and Alawi predominance will probably disappear. There will be a new Syria one different from this one. This is what Assad has to have in his mind when he comes to the negotiating table with Israel, and apparently he has decided that he does not want peace. It is too dangerous for the future of his regime.

Satloff: Raghida, should the Syrians be afraid of peace? What would peace have done to Syria and to Lebanon?

Dergham: When discussing the possibility of an agreement with Syria, people always assume ahead of time that that preconditions will not be met. By saying that there is a loser and a winner in a war, and that the loser has to pay a price, one dismisses everything that has happened so far in the clear attempt to negotiate peace in good faith. The Palestinians have several agreements and can say, "Show me what's in it for me." So far, the process has not given them something with which they should be comfortable. Therefore, taking Mr. Pipes argument and applying it to the Palestinian track is a very dangerous thing.

Satloff: What would peace have done to Syrian-Lebanese relations? There is a general sense that if Israel and Syria had signed a peace agreement, the Lebanese and Syrian tracks would have both been solved, lions would have laid down with lambs in the Middle East, and this would be the comprehensive end to all the Arab-Israeli conflict. Is that what really would have happened had this small territorial issue been resolved?

Dergham: The majority of Arabs have hoped that comprehensive peace would bring the breakthrough in the process begun at Madrid. The majority of the Arabs say comprehensive peace with Israel is good for both Israel and the Arab states in terms of moving on economically and culturally, and in terms of developing relationships with each other. The Arabs are united on the topic of comprehensive peace and see tremendous potential to improve the regional situation as a whole. They are not, however, united about what to do in the absence of a comprehensive peace. From Israel's point of view, why were 200 meters, or any other territorial element, insurmountable if they could have brought the peace that Israel so desired? When Assad said that everything else is negotiable but the June 4 line, he meant it.

Satloff: From the American perspective, the clear understanding was that June 4 was an idea. June 4 was not a line, but rather a concept or something to be demarcated. It was never anything on a map.

Seale: There is some truth in that the June 4 line does not exist on any map, and the Syrians have agreed to set up a committee with the Israelis to demarcate the line. Yet, everybody knows where the June 4 line lies. The maps in the briefing papers indicate that Syria was on the lake, and there is no dispute about that. Barak was hoping to fudge on the lines placement, which explains why he was so reluctant to enter into discussions on demarcation; that is the

reason that Shepherdstown failed. At Blair House, four joint committees were set up, but when they met again at Shepherdstown, the Israelis did not show up at either the border demarcation committee or the water committee meetings. Only once did they come, and it was on the very last day. They were much more anxious to see what Syria would give on the other issues.

Lubrani: This speaks to the nature of the negotiations. The negotiations reached a point and then some new problem arose on the part of the Syrians. The Israelis were constantly confronted with new demands, and there was a feeling that the Israelis were being dragged into something that would ultimately be a nonstarter. Various administrations have gone to great lengths to ensure the Israeli-Syrian peace track. But at the end of the day, there was a breakdown in the negotiations, and it was certainly not Israel's fault.

Dergham: Why is it impossible to ask both the Syrians and the Israelis to bracket the Lake Tiberias issue or to find some other way to ensure a successful round of negotiations? Syria is not absolved from its responsibility at this stage, but neither is Israel. From the Arab point of view, after Geneva, President Clinton adopted Mr. Barak's views and said, "Here is what the Israelis can do, and that is the bottom line." That is not negotiating. Neither side has gone the distance; whether the debate is over 200 meters or 2 meters, neither has gone the distance.

Satloff: One story about what happened in Geneva is that Clinton put forward the idea about the strip along the northeastern shore. Asad refused because he wanted Syrians to be able to swim, barbecue, and fish there. Clinton turned to Asad and said, "Three months ago your foreign minister did not raise the issue of the Galilee waters at Shepherdstown." Asad turned to Faruq al-Shara and said, "Did you really not raise this issue?" al-Shara then changed the topic, the implication being that these issues were not important at Shepherdstown.

Seale: That is not correct. One point that all sides agree on is that the atmosphere turned sour very quickly in Geneva in the first six or seven minutes. The Syrians went to Geneva with great hopes. They had been led to believe, rightly or wrongly, that Barak was ready now at last, if only privately, to endorse the commitment to withdraw to the June 4 line a commitment that his predecessors, Rabin and Peres, had already made. Asad was very heartened by this, and he was prepared in return to give some major assurances on normalization, water, and the timetable. He went to Geneva with a large delegation of 130 people and thought that this was going to be a historic moment that would relaunch the peace process. Indeed, the press both Arab and international reflected this optimism. Everyone thought this was the great moment. Martin Indyk, for example, was optimistic that this could be an indication of an exchange of assurances by both sides.

What appears to have happened is that Barak mobilized Clinton, who perhaps complied unwittingly, into putting forth his own maximalist demands, which included total control of the lake and total mastery over the waters flowing into the lake. Why did Barak think that Clinton could pressure Asad into making these concessions? One reason is that the Israelis were very much influenced by Kissinger's account of his negotiations with Asad. Kissinger wrote in one of his books that Asad would negotiate until the very last minute, almost going over the edge of the precipice. At the very last minute, holding on with his fingernails, he would then yield. In this case in particular, it turned out to be a mistake.

Another more complicated reason is linked to Ronald Lauder, who carried out a few private negotiations during the Netanyahu era. Barak saw him shortly after assuming office, and Lauder gave Barak the impression that Asad was prepared to negotiate on the basis of the 1923 line. But Lauder unwittingly confused the June 4 line with the 1923 line. This suggestion must still be lodged in Barak's mind.

A third possible reason why the Israelis thought Asad could be pressured is that very often one hears in Israel that the Syrian economy is on its knees, that Asad is dying, and that he wants to hand over power to his son. People think that Asad is in the mood to make concessions, although the contrary is true. Asad does not want to give his son a

flawed deal and is therefore likely to be harder in negotiations, because he wants to give his son an honorable deal.

Regarding territory, Asad has been remarkably consistent. From the beginning of the Madrid process, he was sticking to the June 4 line. But Barak misread the legacy of the past negotiations. It is a great misunderstanding of the Arab world to think that they or the Syrians do not want peace. It is also a mistake to think that Syria is a closed society. Although it is not high-tech, it has not had the \$100 billion of American money or the 300,000 Russian graduates that Israel enjoys. Syria is largely an agricultural country, and it has food and energy security.

Lubrani: Syria is on the list of terrorist-supporting countries, so they do not qualify for funds.

Seale: It is on the list of terrorist-supporting countries for an incident that happened in 1986. If one looks carefully, the entire incident is very mysterious and shadowy. The Mossad was deeply involved.

Pipes: It seems strange to suggest that Barak used Clinton as his spokesman and that in 1986 the Mossad was actually behind a Syrian attempt to sabotage an El Al plane. President Clinton was not a spokesman for Barak; he was presenting what he understood to be, as Mr. Lubrani suggested, the very best effort the United States could make to bridge these positions.

Seale: President Clinton was outraged by the briefing he had been given by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and National Security Advisor Sandy Berger, and indeed, Asad was angry with al-Shara for setting this thing up that ended as a trap.

Satloff: Mr. Seale spoke about the Israeli misconception of how the Syrians should act toward Israel. Mr. Lubrani said that the Syrians have no idea how important Israeli public opinion is. Why is there such a disconnect? Why is it that whenever the Syrians have an opportunity to say something, they say something very negative? Ehud Yaari interviewed Faruq al-Shara several years ago, and it was a step backward for the peace process. This spring, not only were there no positive statements from the Syrians, but there were the most vicious Nazi references in the Syrian media in February and March after the breakdown at Shepherdstown. Why is there this sense that when the Syrian officials open their mouths, it will actually be a step in the wrong direction? Raghida, this is not always commonplace not all Arab leaders have the same approach to public opinion. Why is it so bad coming from the Syrians?

Dergham: Sometimes, only half the story is heard. Everyone was presented with different accounts regarding the events in Geneva. For example, in the story Rob told, why would Asad say, "I want even the water of the lake"? Another account claims that Asad said repeatedly to Clinton, "Do I get my land back? Do I get back my land? Once I get the territorial concession that I have been so consistent about insisting upon throughout the years, everything else will be doable." From Asad's point of view, the disconnect is the idea that President Clinton actually said, "Yes, I'll give you your land back." This is a misconception in the Syrian mindset; they think the United States can deliver Israel.

From another point of view, when Clinton was unable to assure Asad that he understood him, Asad felt terribly misunderstood and deceived. Asad then said, "Not only do I want the lake and the shores, but I want the water too." The story continues with Rob's account. In each version, there is always this disconnect and misinterpretation. The Syrians never pretended to invest in public opinion. They were consistent and never took part in a kind of gesture diplomacy, even though they were very flexible with everything else. Again, the American and Israeli media bombarded them: "Where are you? Why do you not shake hands? Where are the gestures?" Yet, the Syrians never said they would give the gestures. Disappointment awaits those who expect this kind of behavior from them. The Syrians have their own unique style of negotiating.

Pipes: The Syrians consistently demand every last meter of the land they lost in 1967 and insist that they will never help Israeli public opinion. Why does the fact that they are consistent justify their actions?

Seale: Syria has not engaged in public diplomacy, even though it should. Syria should make gestures and be more sensitive to Israeli public opinion. Syria should help Barak make what is a difficult decision. Perhaps Syrians are incapable of doing it for various reasons. It is important, however, to put oneself in their position. Their land is occupied. Lebanon, just next door, is bombed almost daily by the Israelis, and its sovereignty has been violated for decades. The international community is worried about the 17,000 Israeli settlers on the Golan, but hundreds of thousands of Syrians were expelled from the Golan and are now refugees waiting to return to their villages, which have been obliterated.

Foreign Minister al-Shara obviously comes under some pressure domestically that is the reason he did not shake hands. That was a little mistake, and they should have shaken hands. Holocaust denial articles in the Syrian press are huge mistakes. Yet, the Syrians are convinced that their cause is right. They feel they are victimized and that Israel is aggressive and expansionist and uses its military power to impose its own terms. David Levys remarks caused a terrific outcry when he said "A child for a child and a life for a life." Uri will tell you that, since 1984, only eight or nine Israelis have been killed in northern Israel as a result of cross-border attacks. Of course, Israel also lost about twenty soldiers illegally occupying a neighboring state.

Now, on the Lebanese side, 19,000 were killed in the first weeks of Israels invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Hundreds of thousands were regularly dispersed from their homes in Operations Accountability and Grapes of Wrath. Material damage ran into the billions of dollars, and the disproportionate violence on both sides was colossal. Asking the Syrians and the Lebanese to make gestures of friendship to Israel is a large request. Israel, unlike in the past, can no longer impose its rule by force of arms.

Satloff: When could Israel do this?

Seale: Former Prime Minister David Ben Gurion sought hegemony over the region by military means. This has been pursued by other Israelis ever since. That era is coming to an end. Countries now need coexistence and must respect their neighbors. Peace is the best guarantee of security, but Syria cannot have security with Israel at the expense of the insecurity of its other neighbors.

Lubrani: Mr. Seale, you should not bring in these Lebanese dimensions when discussing Syria, because the Syrian regime does not care about Lebanese lives; if it did, it would have behaved differently toward the Lebanese. The Syrians do not want Lebanon to make peace with Israel, because they want the Golan Heights.

Seale: The Syrians do not want a separate peace; they want a peace for both countries together.

Lubrani: Let the Lebanese decide for themselves. Why does Syria decide for them?

Seale: Of course, the Syrians do not want Israel to withdraw from Lebanon while they remain in the Golan. They want a comprehensive peace based on full withdrawal.

Pipes: A comprehensive peace allows the Syrians to remain in Lebanon with 35,000 armed troops.

[Note: Due to a mechanical error in the audio system, the subsequent question and part of Mr. Lubranis response were not recorded.]

Lubrani: Syria began to use the Lebanese militia, Hizballah, but not only Hizballah, to get us needled enough to pay heed to Syrian demands for the Golan Heights. We tried from time to time to sense whether there was a chance of negotiating directly with Lebanon. We were asked, "Why dont you negotiate?" But the Lebanese would not talk to us, and they would not talk to us because the Syrians told them not to talk to us. I am saying this not because I heard it, but because I lived it; nothing would have been easier than for Israel and Lebanon to strike a deal. I sat here in this city at the beginning of the 1990s after Madrid as the head of an Israeli delegation in bilateral talks with a Lebanese delegation. And at that time, the only thing the Lebanese delegation wanted was our agreement with Security Council

Resolution 425. I was talking about peace, but the head of the Lebanese delegation said, "We want 425." Now, they do not want 425 because the Syrians do not want 425. But at that time, 425 was the only demand.

Now Resolution 425 is to be implemented, and I have been privy to some of the tribulations, considerations, and apprehensions concerning this proposition. In the United Nations, of course, they have Sierra Leone on their minds, but they are going to send a UN force into an environment in Lebanon that could very well blow up into something similar. And, therefore, they have to be very careful. I do not know how it will end, but I know one thing the SLA will have to be disbanded.

Israel is committed to taking in any member of the SLA who had contact with us and who feels threatened in Lebanon. The Israeli government has made all the possible arrangements. We will take him in, and we will give him whatever he needs to pursue a new life, or even to go somewhere else in the world to continue life there. That we are ready to do. But of late we feel that, while we are planning for a considerable number, the number may be less than we expected because some do not want to leave. They come to me and say, "We want to stay for now, and we don't want to become refugees." Of course, they are all sons of farmers, and they do not want to leave their land. But there is another reason. They are being subjected daily to propaganda from Hizballah and from the central government but mostly from Hizballah. In a recent case, Shaykh Hasan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hizballah, went on Lebanese television saying, "Not only are we going to slaughter you, but we are going to slaughter you in your beds." I have the cassette with me of this statement. So these people feel not only that they are threatened, but that their whole village is threatened and their family is threatened. And here we have a problem. We will have to see how best we can manage it.

Satloff: Israel is planning to withdraw according to Resolution 425, something that Lebanon has requested for many years. Why did the president of Lebanon say that if Israel withdraws there would be war?

Dergham: The president of Lebanon had said that if Israeli withdrawal were certain, then under particular circumstances there would be war. The Lebanese government accepts Resolution 425. When the envoy of the UN secretary general went to the region, he received assurances from that same president of Lebanon, and from the prime minister, and also from Syria, that they would cooperate with the United Nations in the implementation of Resolutions 425 and 426. The Israelis are withdrawing from southern Lebanon because they have to. If the Israelis had withdrawn within the context of a peace agreement with Syria and Lebanon, they would have received something in return. Militarily, the Israeli strategy has failed; this is a retreat, because 250 soldiers died in Lebanon. It has been a failed policy, and so after twenty-two years of rejecting Resolution 425, the Israelis are now agreeing to implement it.

Implementation of Resolution 425 will not decouple the Lebanese and the Syrian tracks, because both Lebanon and Syria have established these two tracks of negotiation. It is not the simultaneity of withdrawal, or the timing of the withdrawal, but rather the signature of the peace agreement. The Syrians are now supporting the implementation of Resolution 425. They were quite confused in the beginning before the Israelis gave formal notification to the Security Council and agreed to implement these conditions. That was when the president of Lebanon said there would be war. In the past couple of weeks, constant arrangements have been made. The secretary general is right now preparing the report that he will be submitting to the Security Council on Monday. The Security Council will debate it on Tuesday, and everything will be in that report regarding the steps to be taken by Lebanon, Israel, and Syria.

Satloff: To be fair, many Lebanese politicians have said, "We do not care if the Israelis withdraw from Lebanon, unless they also solve the Palestinian refugee issue."

Dergham: That statement is a reference to what the president of Lebanon had said in a letter that he sent to the UN secretary general. Since that was before Terje Larsens trip throughout the region, the issue is no longer on the table.

Satloff: So that is no longer Lebanese policy?

Dergham: No, it is no longer on the table. The policy is currently being discussed. The two problems are actually the SLA and Sheba, the disputed farmland. The SLA has been an auxiliary and proxy of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the occupation force. From the point of view of the Lebanese government and people, the SLA has been working for the occupier. That is not to say that Nasrallah was justified in saying that they should be slaughtered. But the government of Lebanon is responsible for taking care of the families, not for listening to the Israeli demands and giving the SLA amnesty. The Lebanese government cannot be expected to offer amnesty to those soldiers and commanders who betrayed their country and worked for the occupation. The SLA is an Israeli problem above all. Sheba, however, is a different story.

Lubrani: The SLA is an Israeli problem and Israel is committed to it. Israel is willing to take in anybody from the SLA who feels threatened.

Dergham: The UN has more demands.

Lubrani: Israel is not yet fully aware of what the report will say, because it has not yet been written. The prime minister is set on conforming to and complying with what the report says. The issue at hand is not whether the withdrawal is or is not a defeat. The point is that this is what Israeli public opinion wants and what the Israeli government has committed itself to carry out. Some people believe that it is risky to withdraw, but once the government decides upon this, it is going to happen and in the best way possible.

This said, if the majority of the SLA opts to stay in Lebanon and something happens to them, it will not be the Lebanese government that causes it. Syria will instigate it because it might be in its own interests, and then Israel will point the finger at Syria. This will, in turn, cause a major problem for Damascus.

Satloff: Syria is the power broker in Lebanon, with some 35,000 troops. Lebanese politicians do not make a move without first asking Damascus. Whenever a Lebanese politician says something about implementing Resolution 425, and al-Shara says something else, then the Lebanese backtrack. The Syrians cannot be too happy that southern Lebanon and the Golan are being "decoupled." What is Syria going to do when Israel withdraws? How are the Syrians going to relate to Hizballah? Will there continue to be a flow of weapons from Syria to Hizballah? Do you expect there to be violence across the border?

Seale: First, it will not be the case that Syria acts as the instigating force behind the massacres, contrary to what Mr. Lubrani has suggested. The fighting force of the SLA is about 2,000 or 2,500 strong, but they are weakened by defections. In addition to that, there are a couple of thousand people who are engaged in the civil administration of that area, and there are about two or three thousand Lebanese who work in Israel, mainly in agriculture. These people have dependents, families, homes, and businesses. What is going to happen to all 25,000 of them? The Lebanese government and Hizballah have made it pretty clear that they are not intending to exact revenge on the families. The officers, if they surrender, will be put on trial. If they do not surrender, they will have to seek asylum in Israel or in other countries. The families and Hasan Nasrallah confirmed this will not be punished. There is nothing in Islam that encourages punishment of innocent families, and the Lebanese government has said much the same. Collaborators people who fought and killed Lebanese soldiers or members of Hizballah will of course have to flee. Whether they choose to stay and fight will depend on what weapons the Israelis leave behind for them.

Prime Minister Barak's preferred option was not a unilateral withdrawal. He wanted the withdrawal within the context of a deal with Syria. Unfortunately, the deal was not possible, because of those few hundred meters discussed earlier. Barak is now bound to honor the pledge he made to the electorate to pull back within a year. As Uri himself said a moment ago, it is a leap in the dark. Nobody really knows what is going to happen there. Nobody can gaze into a crystal ball. The point is that nobody knows who is going to control that area in the south.

People talk about expanding the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to seven or eight thousand, but UNIFIL has no peace enforcement mandate. Its members have no intention of sending troops into a danger zone; there have been too many bad examples, such as Sierra Leone. The Irish and the Finns simply want to pull out of UNIFIL. The French have been very cautious and have not committed to sending troops if there is to be trouble. Also, UNIFIL is not significant; the Israelis have ignored the United Nations for half a century, and now they want help from the UN? It is a bit late.

Satloff: Who, then, has an interest in turning southern Lebanon into a danger zone?

Seale: The Syrians and the Lebanese have no intention of going in there and taking the blame for any cross-border incidents. Israel has built right up to the border, and so it would be very easy for a sniper to shoot a couple of farmers through the fence. What will Israel do then? The Israeli government has hinted at a policy of massive retaliation. This means that agreements of the past, such as the 1976 red line agreements and the 1996 understandings about hitting civilian targets on the Syrian side, will not stop a policy of massive retaliation. This is a recipe for escalation and ultimately even war. The Syrians suspect perhaps wrongly that there are hawks in Israel who would not mind an escalation. This would offer an opportunity for a military showdown in Syria.

Satloff: For many years, Syria claimed it would permit the supplying of Hizballah because the organization is fighting an occupation in southern Lebanon. Will that policy now come to an end, because there will no longer be an occupation there?

Seale: On the Lebanese side of the border, there is constant bombing, depopulation of the whole region, and tens if not hundreds of thousands of Lebanese have been forced to move to slums around southern Beirut. Mr. Lubrani does not take into account the fact that every now and then Israel launches an operation that displaces three or four thousand people from their homes and leads to massacres like the one in Qana.

Satloff: For many years, the Syrian position has been such that it permits resupply to Hizballah in the name of fighting occupation.

Seale: First of all, many people suppose that Hizballah is a creature created by Syria and Iran. The fact of the matter is that Hizballah represents the Shia population of southern Lebanon who have been victimized by this policy of almost constant, daily bombing. It is a national resistance movement to occupation that tries to protect the people of southern Lebanon. In the meantime, Hizballah has developed into a formidable guerrilla force perhaps one of the finest in the world in terms of the skill of its military operations, equipment, adaptability to Israeli tactics, and political leadership. It has become possibly the strongest political force in Lebanon.

The Syrian troops are not supplied in an offensive position. The latest figure is about 22,000, and the Syrians have been thinning out and redeploying their troops in recent weeks, frightened of a military confrontation that might follow. Also, Israel's involvement in Lebanon goes back a long way. A young academic in Britain named Kirsten Schulze wrote a book called *Israel's Covert Diplomacy in Lebanon*. It is fascinating and describes in great detail Israel's involvement in the 1982 invasion. She claims that Israel's aims were not simply to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization, but also to drive out the Syrians and bring Lebanon into Israel's sphere of influence by placing a leader of Israel's choice in Lebanon. But Syria and its allies were able to abort the so-called May 17, 1983, question brokered by then-U.S. secretary of state George Shultz, which would have confirmed Israeli tutelage over Lebanon. As President Asad would say, that was the finest success of his presidency. He labored to wrest Lebanon out of Israel's orbit.

The withdrawal that is now being discussed really began then because of a failure of the policy of trying to reshape the Middle East and give Israel regional hegemony by controlling Lebanon and neutralizing Syria. This was the policy that Ariel Sharon and Menachem Begin dreamed of, but it turned out to be a mistake. The Israelis now admit

the whole invasion was a mistake, and Israel is finally withdrawing from Lebanon.

Will Syria continue to support Hizballah? It depends on whether the Israeli withdrawal is complete and whether Israel respects Lebanese airspace and maritime waters. Also, it remains to be seen whether the SLA is to be truly disbanded or whether it will continue to control this little strip of land and be protected by Israeli artillery and air power. It depends on whether the notorious prison at Khiam is opened up and the Lebanese prisoners who have been held there for years are released. All these things will determine how Hizballah behaves. If Syria ceases military operations, it will nevertheless remain armed, because no peace agreement has yet been concluded. This is just a unilateral withdrawal the Syrians will want to see how Israel behaves. Will Israel leave Lebanon alone after all these decades of involvement and infringement upon its sovereignty? This is the key question.

Satloff: Israel will get out of Lebanon. Mr. Seale says that Hizballah will not attack and that Syria has no interest in having a hot Lebanon-Israel border. Is withdrawal, therefore, no longer a leap into the unknown? It sounds like everybody is going to be holding their guns.

Seale: There are other actors.

Pipes: Mr. Seale has predicted that Hizballah will cease military operations. In the past, Hizballah has laid claim to nothing less than Jerusalem, and most recently has laid claim to villages in the Galilee, the Sheba farms, and so forth; the Syrians just this week have endorsed some of these claims. The Sheba issue is laying the groundwork for future attacks. Hasan Nasrallah also sees Israel as weak, a state on the run. Raghidas characterization of Israel as a defeated state is a correct one; Israel has been defeated. But this fancy talk about how Israels defeat is actually a threat to the Syrians is nonsense. Israel lost badly; the Syrians, Hizballah, and Iran all know it. They are all savoring their victory at this moment, and preparing for the next step. Shortly, it will be determined for certain whether the northern border will remain quiet or not. It seems as if it will not be.

Using a policy of deterrence, Israel has been successful vis-à-vis its neighbors with the outstanding exception of Lebanon. When the Egyptians, Jordanians, and Syrians in the 1950s and 1960s were perpetuating guerrilla attacks and other trouble making on their borders with Israel, the Israelis responded with a policy of deterrence. With time, the attacks stopped. In Lebanon, that policy did not work after 1967, because there was no central authority in Lebanon with the power to withhold the attacks. From the 1967 war until now, Lebanon has been a source of anxiety the great failure of Israeli foreign policy. Israelis have not been able to cope with it. In 1978 and then 1982, they went into Lebanon to try to create a cordon that would protect them. It is that cordon that led to the deaths of hundreds of soldiers, but only a few civilians. And it is from that cordon that they are withdrawing. From an Israeli point of view, it is an enormous risk. They are going back to the kinds of attacks on their northern towns that were possible in the 1970s. But it is even worse now, because the kind of morale and spirit in Israel that would allow them to stand up for themselves in the 1970s is no longer there.

The Syrian occupation of Lebanon is an extraordinary development. Lebanon is today the only satellite state in the world. Lebanon is different from Syria; it has a civil society and there is considerable freedom of speech. Some of the earlier analysis regarding the Alawis was printed in full in a Beirut publication because of Lebanons freedom of speech; the relationship resembles that of Poland and the Soviet Union. Lebanon is much livelier than Syria: There is commerce, and although the economy is not great, it is far better than Syrias. Millions of Syrians are now working in Lebanon, which has a population of three to four million. The key point is that the Syrian government has never accepted an independent Lebanon. Between 1975, when the war began within Lebanon, until 1990 a span of fifteen years the Syrians did to Lebanon roughly what Iraq did to Kuwait. Iraq did it to Kuwait in four hours; the Syrians did it to Lebanon over fifteen years. Fifteen years is a lot more effective, however, and the Syrians now control Lebanon. No Lebanese politician makes any decision without going first to Damascus.

Mr. Seale pointed to a book written in Britain about Israeli ambitions in Lebanon. I might be so bold as to say that I have myself authored a book called Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition, in which you may find much detail about Syrian aspirations in Lebanon. From 1920 on, Syrians of all stripes have refused to accept Lebanon as an independent country. Unless there is a significant change in the power equation for example, should Asad die and there be a lot of turmoil in Syria Syrian forces will not leave. They are there for the duration. At the same time, the great strength of Lebanon is its civil society. No matter how much it is battered, Lebanon is likely, in the end, to emerge independent. That is a long-term prognosis.

Although it is not a large group, the SLA under the tutelage of Israel has also become a significant force, though it does not control a large piece of ground. It has predominantly, but not exclusively, Christian membership; as a whole, the officer corps is a patriotic, predominantly Shii ❖

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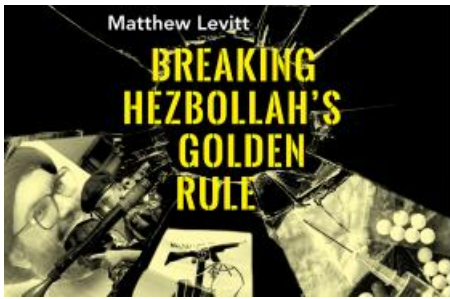
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