

# Crossing Between Two Tracks:

## Barak, Syria, and the Palestinians

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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



### Brief Analysis

The withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from southern Lebanon announced by Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak looms large. Set for July 7, this withdrawal is closely linked to the Syrian track of negotiations. It will end the fifteen-year status quo of the security zone, with Israel planning to defend itself from the international border with Lebanon. The target date is also a deadline for the negotiations with the Syrians, as nine years after the peace conference in Madrid we are likely to witness either a breakthrough or a breakdown.

Breakthrough Four major issues remain: whether the border will be on the shores of Lake Kinneret, whether there will be an Israeli presence on Mount Hermon, the scope of Syrian armor and troop pullbacks (to create a buffer zone against the risk of a surprise Syrian attack), and water. These issues require creative thinking in order to reach a solution. For instance, the Syrians should be discussing how much water they need rather than what their rights are; the old data show that Syria did not use much water when it still owned the Golan. Trade-offs are also possible on these issues, and overall, symbolism will be very important. For example, demilitarizing Syrian territory beyond the Golan might be compensated by a Syrian flag flying on the shoreline of Lake Kinneret. The question of the sequence of events in case of an agreement also remains open. It is not clear whether the departure of the last Israeli soldier from the Golan would have to come before implementation of the other stages of a peace agreement.

There are several reasons for Israel to prioritize reaching a deal with Syria now. One important factor is the regional balance of power. At present, Israel is strong and Syria is weak. At a later point, Israel might find less preferable circumstances for striking a deal, if for instance, Iraq or Iran were to become more involved in the power balance. So it is prudent to strike a deal while Israel is at the height of its power and the others are not. Furthermore, Israel knows the current "old guard" of leaders who are in the position to implement a deal. By contrast, their successors, the "new guard," would find it much harder to make peace; they would have to flex muscles and prove that they are in control.

In the event of a deal, Israel is likely to receive the \$17 billion package of military aid on the basis of which talks have been held. But the civilian component is more difficult. Relocating settlers is not something the United States will be happy to pay for, since it has always opposed settlements. And the question is open as to what will happen to the

infrastructure that would be left behind on the Golan in case of an Israeli withdrawal; Israel wants payment if it is to leave the infrastructure intact. The United States cannot be the only player in this peace process. As with support for the Palestinian Authority (PA), an international consortium would be needed, including the European Union (EU) and Asia.

Breakdown A withdrawal of Israel's military presence in southern Lebanon would leave Syria unable to use what has been one of its major cards in the negotiations, namely, the implicit offer of peace in southern Lebanon in return for Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. On the other hand, a unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon poses the threat of a security vacuum that might be filled by Hizballah increasing attacks on Israel. In other words, a withdrawal is a high-stakes poker game.

It is difficult to see how the Israeli-Syrian negotiations could proceed smoothly after an Israeli unilateral withdrawal. Post-withdrawal, Syria would have no interest in keeping the Lebanese-Israeli border quiet, and Iran would continue supporting Hizballah in southern Lebanon; as long as there is no rapprochement between Iran and the United States, there will be no solution to Iranian pressure on Israel. A unilateral withdrawal risks creating the impression that Israel is weak, in which case some might think Israel will not retaliate for post-withdrawal attacks on its northern communities. In fact, these are untested waters. In the scenario of a breakdown, Israel could escalate its retaliation, and a missile war is a realistic possibility.

But a breakdown on the Syria track would not necessarily lead to a breakdown on the Palestinian track. In fact, accomplishing both tracks simultaneously would be very difficult. It is impossible, for example, to take the 17,000 settlers from the Golan and simultaneously make a deal inside the Jerusalem municipal border. Irrespective of what happens on the Syrian track, a limited deal on the Palestinian track is possible, settling the issues of statehood and the settlements in the West Bank, although decisions on Jerusalem might be postponed to future date.

Barak's Domestic Strategy For Barak, reaching a deal with Syria would be only half a victory. He would subsequently have to face a Knesset in which he now needs sixty-one votes in support of a withdrawal from the Golan (i.e., a majority-no longer a plurality). This situation puts pressure on Shas with its seventeen seats. The importance of the role that Shas plays in providing the necessary majority in such a Knesset vote is reflected in the fact that British prime minister Tony Blair as well as French president Jacques Chirac met with Shas's spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef; it is not unthinkable that President Clinton will also host the rabbi in the White House to foster a deal. Shas's strength comes in part from taking over the Likud's voter base, mainly of North African origin, which-at the grassroots level-is more hawkish. To that extent, a stronger Shas means a better off Barak. Barak follows a "big tent" policy and tries to include the religious parties in the crucial decision making process. He has learned from the mistake of the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who paid little attention to the religious parties in 1993-94.

Barak would also need to win an absolute majority in a plebiscite, but he is in a good position to campaign. While he was the opposition leader, Barak went to the Golan and told the 17,000 settlers that a vote for him in the elections for prime minister would mean painful concessions. But Barak needs to avoid making crucial decisions during the summer months when his generally more affluent voters are on vacation abroad; therefore, any movement in the negotiations should come between now and the end of June.

Barak's political capital is finite. He has not been able to capitalize on significant economic success, with current growth at about four percent annually. The campaign finance scandal has also contributed to Barak's delicate position. At present, the prime minister is subordinating all other issues to the peace process. Until an agreement is reached with Syria, he will have to take a lot of harassment. Only after he has concluded a deal will Barak be able to fight back against his critics.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Heiko Stoiber.

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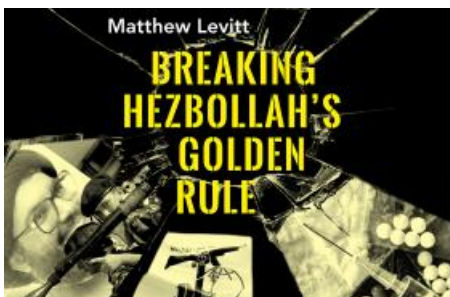
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