

The Clinton-Asad Agenda:

Make Peace . . . But Prevent War, Too

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Brief Analysis

President Clinton's trip to Geneva on Sunday to meet Syrian leader Hafiz al-Asad begins the last leg of the administration's eight-year marathon effort to broker an elusive Syrian-Israeli peace agreement. The stakes, however, are higher than just Clinton's peacemaking legacy. While most observers believe that Syria and Israel are just a whisker away from peace, the two countries are also not much further away from conflict and perhaps war. Within days, the countdown to one of those outcomes will be clear.

Prospects for Peace After eight years of fitful negotiations, gaps between the two antagonists have narrowed considerably. Syria once refused to talk of a "peace treaty," insisted that all Arabs make peace together or not at all, rejected the concept of "security arrangements," and demanded that Israel leave the Golan as quickly as it was occupied (i.e., in six days). Over time, Syria seems to have grudgingly accepted something akin to what Egypt accepted two decades ago--a bilateral peace that includes a staged withdrawal coupled with detailed security provisions that will be implemented over a number of years. On the emotive issue of "normalization," Syria has upped its offer from what one might call an "arctic peace" (no embassies, no trade, no tourism) to merely a "frigid" one (limited access for diplomats, tight restrictions on tourism, and extensive nontariff barriers to trade). For Syria, this level of normalization would itself be quite normal, given that Damascus lacks ambassadors in two of its four other neighbors and considers the presence of 35,000 troops in Lebanon a form of "people-to-people contact."

As for Israel, it has moved considerably from security-based positions once thought inviolable. At various times, Israeli leaders spoke of retaining large slices of the Golan in an era of peace, of lease-back options to retain a presence on the heights, of stretching out withdrawals over a decade, and of "restructuring" the Syrian army as minimum requirements of returning the Golan to Syrian sovereignty. All are gone. Such Israeli magnanimity stems from the fact that two generations of military leaders--from (former chief of staff) Yitzhak Rabin to (former chief of staff) Ehud Barak--have believed that the Golan's topographical advantages do not offset the larger strategic gains Israel would reap from peace with its most implacable neighbor.

The sacred cow under challenge today is Israel's need for a long-term early warning and intelligence station on Mt. Hermon. This too looks likely to be bargained away, with Israel gaining in return high-tech reconnaissance and

satellite assistance from the United States. Indeed, that formula--U.S. compensation to Israel for concessions to Syria--is the linchpin of these negotiations. Without generous American assistance--expected to include a multibillion dollar security package to Israel, an upgrading of the U.S.-Israel defense relationship (mostly in arenas that have little to do with Syrian-Israeli peace) and the possibility of some aid to Syria--this deal will not happen.

Even so, the deal still may not happen. In addition to dozens of details, the key outstanding issue is Syria's demand for demarcation of the border along the ill-defined frontier that existed on the eve of the Six Day War, the so-called "June 4, 1967, lines." In principle, Israel opposes this, given that those lines reflected illegal Syrian encroachment over the years, violating the principle of the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force." In practice, Israel rejects this because it could award Syria rights to the Sea of Galilee, Israel's largest water reservoir. An outright Israeli concession on this point may make a treaty possible, but it may also prompt Israelis to reject the accord in the national referendum that Prime Minister Barak has promised on the issue.

A Descent to War? If no artful solution is found for the Sea of Galilee/border problem (and other items), the talks will break down. In the past, that would have meant weeks of recriminations, some low-level violence in southern Lebanon, shuttle diplomacy by U.S. and European envoys, a phone call from Clinton to Asad, and the eventual resumption of talks. Indeed, some observers believe that Asad's only interest all along has been to maintain the "process" as a way to deflect U.S. concerns about the more odious aspects of his regime, to keep Washington focused on Asad as the putative partner for peace, and perhaps to cultivate a U.S. interest in the peaceful transition of his regime from *pèreto fils*. Whether Asad is interested in peace, the Golan, or the process itself, this play's nine-year run is about to come to an end; the status quo will soon be over. One alternative is peace. The other--impasse at the bargaining table--almost surely means an extended hiatus in negotiation and, in its stead, a possible descent to confrontation, violence, and perhaps even war.

The key trigger here is Barak's gamble of promising to withdraw Israeli troops from southern Lebanon by July 2000. Since 1985, Israel has maintained the nine-mile-wide "security zone" as a forward defense against attacks on Israel's northern border by radical groups like the Iranian-backed Hizballah. Tactically, Israel's strategy has been a success: Very few Israeli civilians have died in cross-border attacks since the zone was established. In recent years, however, that achievement has been obscured by the growing public revulsion at the fact that it has come at the annual price of between twenty-five and thirty soldiers' lives inside the zone itself. (By way of comparison, this is about the same as the number killed each month on Israel's highways.) As national frustration over "Israel's Vietnam" quagmire grew during last year's election, Barak campaigned on a promise to quit Lebanon within a year. After taking office, Barak affirmed his commitment, even though his army opposes a unilateral pull-out. Indeed, most analysts viewed Barak's promise of withdrawal less as policy and more as a tool to prod Syria to bargain more earnestly. Since then, however, the promise took on a political life of its own, with Israel's cabinet voting unanimously two weeks ago to withdraw from Lebanon, despite the deep misgivings of the half-dozen former generals now in ministerial garb.

In the surreal world of Middle Eastern politics, Syria and its Lebanese vassal government are apoplectic at the prospect that Israel might leave Lebanon unconditionally, despite having called for years for just such a withdrawal. Syria believes that keeping Israel bleeding in Lebanon is the best way to focus Israeli attention on the need to withdraw from the Golan, too. In other words, the biggest concession Syria can offer Israel is peace in Lebanon, the last hot border of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Unilateral withdrawal would deny Syria that card, leaving Israelis with little reason to placate Asad and give up the Golan, over which the two sides have not fired a shot in a quarter century.

Should Israel leave Lebanon unilaterally, Israelis will refocus attention on the Palestinian issue, leaving Syria with two options to remind Israel (and a disappointed Washington) that its claim to the Golan has not been satisfied. Either it can entice Israel back to the table with alluring offers of "a better deal" or it can try to force Israel back to the

table as the way to resolve an even worse security crisis than the current low-level fighting in Lebanon. If the past is prologue, Syria is likely to choose vinegar over honey. This could come in the form of Syria encouraging Hizballah or other rejectionists (e.g., Palestinian militants) to build on their "victory" over retreating Israeli troops by continuing attacks into Israel itself, or of Syria reactivating a terrorist infrastructure against Israeli or Jewish targets abroad.

The conflict could quickly escalate. Having redeployed to its own territory, Israel would legitimately claim the right of self-defense and retaliate. The first target would be the actual perpetrators in terrorist camps sprinkled in local villages. When that fails, Israel would adopt the Kosovo air-based strategy of hitting infrastructure targets in Lebanon (electricity transformers, ports, airports) to compel the Lebanese to convince the Syrians to call off the attacks. Given that Syria is willing to fight to the last Lebanese, Israel may soon turn its sights directly on Syrian assets--Syrian troops in the Bekaa Valley and perhaps even Syrian airports that transship Iranian weapons to Hizballah. Although Syria's foreign minister recently admitted that his country was a weakling compared to Israel, it cannot be discounted that Syrian brinkmanship in the wake of an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon could lead eventually to a direct Syrian-Israeli face-off.

This terrifying scenario is not fantasy. Lebanese President Emile Lahoud has already vowed that Israel's unilateral withdrawal will lead to war; Bashar al-Asad too has warned against such a step. Indeed, numerous analysts--Arab, Israeli and American--have concluded that Syria is likely to respond to Israel's unilateral withdrawal by heating up the border zone through its Lebanese surrogates. Add into this explosive mix a Syrian dictator slipping into senility, the thwarted ambitions of Iranian hardliners, the militant zealotry of at least some of the Hizballah leaders, and the heated politics of a U.S. presidential campaign, and the potential for full-scale hostilities rises even more.

Clinton's Geneva Agenda For President Clinton, therefore, the Geneva meeting has a downside as well as an upside. Aside from the shortened tenures of John Kennedy and Gerald Ford, Clinton's is the only post-World War II presidency to have escaped a major Middle Eastern crisis, scandal, or war. Instead, it has been characterized by unprecedented progress toward a resolution of the century-old Arab-Israeli conflict. Success or failure in helping to reach a Syrian-Israeli peace deal is not the only determinant of whether the Clinton administration closes with a legacy affirmed or a legacy lost. It is no less important for the president to act now to prevent a possible descent to conflict in the event that talks break down and Israel follows through on unilateral withdrawal.

Specifically, in addition to advancing negotiations for Syrian-Israeli peace, Clinton should not lose the opportunity to do what he can to prevent a Syrian-Israeli war. His actions should include the following:

- Endorse in the strongest terms Israel's courageous plan to withdraw from Lebanon in July, in the event peace talks fail, and tell Asad that the United States intends to ask the United Nations (UN) to prepare steps to ensure that the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the Lebanese Army secure the Lebanese side of the international border, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolutions 425.
- Warn Asad that the "Grapes of Wrath understandings" that tacitly permit armed Hizballah activity expire with Israel's redeployment to the international border and that any further cross-border acts by Hizballah or groups linked to Syria would be viewed as international terrorism.
- Inform Asad that the United States expects full cooperation of regional actors in the event that Israel fulfills its responsibility under Resolution 425; that the United States specifically demands a cessation of transshipments of Iranian weapons to radicals in Lebanon; that, as long as Syrian troops are stationed in Lebanon, the United States would hold Syria directly responsible for violations of the post-withdrawal Israeli-Lebanese frontier; and that the White House will support Israel bilaterally and in the court of public opinion should Israel then claim the right to retaliate against cross-border attacks as well as against those parties that provide material support for such attacks.
- Reinforce these messages to Asad by urging Arab leaders to welcome Israel's withdrawal and to call for a peaceful

post-withdrawal border. (This would appropriately reverse the peculiar criticism of Israel's withdrawal plans recently voiced by senior-level Syrian and Lebanese officials and Arab League foreign ministers.) A timely first opportunity for such a statement will present itself when Clinton hosts Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in Washington on Monday, the day after his Geneva meeting with Asad.

Defining U.S. policy in the event of Israel's unilateral withdrawal is not just preparing for the worst. On the contrary, putting Syria on notice in such a way may push Asad toward making peace more readily than blandishments and enticements pull him in that direction.

Robert Satloff is the executive director of The Washington Institute. For more on the implications of an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, see the report of the Institute's Lebanon Study Group, [The Last Arab-Israeli Battlefield?](#), [\(templateC04.php?CID=25\)](#) edited by Patrick Clawson and Michael Eisenstadt.

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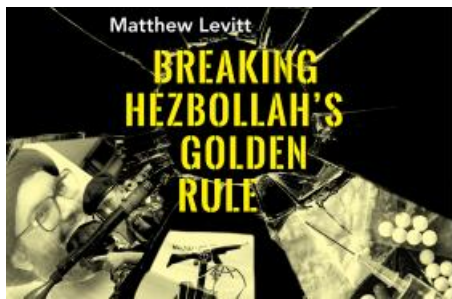
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