

'Red Lines' in the Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Palestinian Tracks

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Feb 24, 2000

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Brief Analysis

In the negotiations between Israel and both Syria and the Palestinians, each side has red lines--points on which it cannot concede. No agreement will be possible that crosses the red line of either side. Not all red lines are the same. In particular, Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have to draw red lines based on how much either can concede and still obtain the support of the public for the agreement, whereas in Syria, President Hafiz al-Asad is the sole decision maker.

The Red Lines of the Israel-Syrian Track The main issues of the Israeli-Syrian negotiations focus on the future borders, security arrangements, water, and normalization of relations between the two countries (though normalization is of lesser importance than the first three).

The Syrian Red Lines. The two major red lines for the Syrians are, first, full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan to the June 4, 1967, lines and, second, security arrangements such as limitations on Israeli forces near the border so that they do not threaten Damascus. Israel must treat this latter issue with care in the construction of a comprehensive security arrangement package.

The Israeli Red Lines. Israel's two main red lines regard security and water. Israel seeks a comprehensive security package that encompasses all security arrangements. The arrangements should be seen as a package with various elements such as early warning stations, border supervision procedures, and limitations on forces near the border. The elements of the package can be rearranged: If Syria objects to one component, a tradeoff can be made for other elements.

With regard to water, the Israelis want substantial defense of their water sources, both the Sea of Galilee and the sources of the Jordan River. Israeli public opinion is very opposed to Syria claiming any part of the Sea of Galilee, whereas Syria states that the seashore is within its 1967 border.

Syrian newspaper articles accusing Israel of being a Nazi-like regime neither help normalization, nor improve the chances for success of a future Israeli referendum on a peace treaty with Syria. Asad is doing nothing to meet with ordinary Israelis, unlike PA chairman Yasir Arafat, who regularly receives Israeli visitors.

The Other Players. The complexities of the Syrian-Israeli track arise in short because of the three other players that will be part of any agreement but are not acting negotiators. These are, namely, Lebanon, Hizballah, and Iran. Any agreement signed between Israel and Syria will include understandings about Lebanon at least implicitly and must

incorporate provisions that at least serve to quell the other two actors.

Syria's occupation of Lebanon currently serves to stabilize Lebanon, but this will not necessarily be the case in the future. Israel should not make agreements that assume Syria's permanent presence in Lebanon. A strong argument can be made that, if Israel must exit Palestine, then Syria must exit Lebanon. There is time for another push in the process, but in the meantime the Palestinian track should be pursued at maximum capacity.

The Role of the United States. In any Israeli-Syrian treaty the United States will play a decisive role. The controversy over this role in Israel focuses on the possible deployment of U.S. troops on the Golan. Such a deployment would damage U.S.-Israeli relations. Israel wants Americans to help monitor the Israeli-Syrian border and take part in the security arrangements, but not with fighting forces.

A solution that takes into account these red lines is very possible, even though the meetings at Sheperdstown between the Israelis, the Syrians, and the Americans failed for various reasons. But there is pressure on all sides because of the short timetable--for Syria, owing to Asad's failing health, and for the United States, owing to President Bill Clinton's short remaining time in office.

The Red Lines of the Palestinian-Israeli Track The red lines on the Palestinian-Israeli track are much more complex than those on the Syrian track because the two are much more intertwined. On the former track, the most complex problem is the territorial issue, because it is the core of all the issues of contention: Jerusalem, the settlements, the refugees, water, borders, and security.

The Palestinians and the Israelis know each other very well, unlike the Syrians, who know very little of Israel's personality. After many years, the Israelis have come to terms with the creation of a Palestinian state. The major questions still surrounding the future Palestinian state regard the dimensions of the future country, its security arrangements, and the capital. The Palestinians hope for a country with territorial contiguity, a minimum of extraterritorial Israeli settlement enclaves, control of their country's natural resources, common borders with Arab countries, and control of the passages to these countries.

Until the problems on the Palestinian-Israeli track are solved, the Arab-Israeli conflict will never see its end. If the negotiations fail, the consequences for Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict are grave.

The Palestinian Red Lines. The Palestinians' main red line is independence. Without the ultimate goal of statehood, the Palestinian struggle is meaningless. The second major red line for the Palestinians is Jerusalem. The Palestinians stipulate that part of Jerusalem will become the capital of the future Palestinian State.

The Israeli Red Lines. Israel's most important red line is the end of the conflict. Israel seeks, upon the signing of a peace agreement, a reconciliation with the Palestinians while Arafat is still their leader, and acceptance of the principle that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has come to an end. Without the proclamation of the end of the conflict, the Israelis will not be willing to make concessions. Israelis will not accept the Palestinian argument that ending the conflict is a process; it must come to an end with the peace agreement.

A second red line concerns the Palestinian demand for the right of return--that is, the return of Palestinian refugees to Israel. Israel is willing to cede territory to keep the sanctity of a democratic Jewish state, but it will not agree to resolve the refugee problem by turning Israel into a binational state. Israel believes that the refugee problem should be solved within the Palestinian state with Israeli and international aid.

The third major red line is security. As in the Syrian case, Israel must seek a comprehensive security package. The elements of the package would include a restricted Palestinian army similar to a national guard (no armor, artillery, or air force); no foreign troops on Palestinian soil; early warning stations facing east; access by the Israeli Air Force to Palestinian airspace (with the same restrictions on flights as over Israel); and no encouragement of irredentist

activities among the ethnic Palestinian population in Israel or in Jordan.

At present there is no movement in the negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The Palestinians think that the Syrian track is Israel's first priority, and they are therefore under the impression that it is better for them to wait and to hold back their proposals. This may give way to a dangerous situation if the current status continues and there is a declaration of statehood by the Palestinians, as there are many questions about how Israel would respond.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Erika Reff.

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