

# Syria-Israel Negotiations:

## Implications and Prospects

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Brief Analysis

**T**HOMAS FRIEDMAN

International Context: Syria's position must be viewed within the system of globalization that has replaced the previous Cold War order. The rules of the globalization system are qualitatively different from those of the Cold War and will influence the politics and economics of all states. Whereas the Cold War system was characterized by division, the globalization system is characterized by integration. States within the globalization system wear a "Golden Straightjacket"--they are required to conform to the rules of global economics. Privatization and foreign trade, the fabric of the Golden Straightjacket, cause a state's economy to expand and its politics to shrink. Political choices become nuances of taste, narrowed to quandaries like, Pepsi or Coke? The energy source of the globalization system is the "Electronic Herd"--the aggregate of investors ranging from individuals engaging in e-commerce to multinational investors. A state cannot thrive without plugging into this Electronic Herd and cannot survive unless it protects itself from the herd. The quality of the government matters more, not less, because it is the conduit into which the system is plugged. If a state amounts to a faulty plug, the country will neither thrive nor survive. The new challenge is to reduce the size and increase the quality of the state. Countries are like computers. The overwhelming majority of states have the same hardware--free markets. The question is whether a country has the right operating system--that is, sound macroeconomic policy, democracy, and the rule of law.

Cold War geopolitics were characterized by the chessboard and the checkbook. The world was a chessboard in which the competing superpowers worried about every pawn of a little state. Soviet and American taxpayers pulled out their checkbooks as needed to secure the loyalty of each state. The operating system a state used internally mattered little to the United States; what mattered was its external policies. Under globalization, geopolitics continue, but little countries often do not matter anymore. The checkbook is no longer controlled by the superpowers. If developing countries want capital, they must now turn to the "Supermarket"--the stock, bond, and currency markets. A state's external politics are irrelevant to the Supermarket. What matters is the operating system it is using on the inside.

Syria--A Failing State: Syria is a failing--and heavily armed--state. Its gross domestic product (GDP) has been declining since the fall of the Berlin Wall, despite its oil resources. The United States has two models in its dealings

with Syria: the policy Washington has adopted towards Cuba, or the policy it has followed toward North Korea. The U.S. policy vis-à-vis Cuba is to let Cuba fail and contribute where possible to this outcome. By contrast, U.S. policy vis-à-vis North Korea is to arrange for a soft landing that brings North Korea into the world community. In Syria's case, the United States has chosen the North Korea approach. Yet, there will have to be a serious debate in Israel about which model fits Israel's interests better.

Why did Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad move toward peace? In the case of Egypt in the 1970s, it was the primacy of the domestic political pressures which led to Anwar Sadat's peace with Israel. The motivation was the same for Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat's agreement in Oslo. And the same can also be said of Syria: Asad was more afraid of his internal situation than he was of dealing with Israel.

The Character of the Peace: It is not enough for Israel to ask for a strategic deal with Syria like the Israeli-Egyptian peace. To be sure, there is a strong argument for a strategic peace, similar to Israel trading the Sinai for peace with Egypt. Withdrawal from Sinai in return for U.S.-enforced monitoring and redeployment of the Egyptian army ended the risk of a surprise attack on Israel. Much the same could be the case with the Golan. U.S. or international monitoring of the area would provide Israel with advance warning such that it could mobilize its reserve army in the case of attack.

Yet, Israel cannot have only a strategic peace with Syria as was the case with Egypt; the substantial differences between the two countries mean that peace can endure only if there are internal changes in Syria. For the entire Arab-Israeli conflict, Egypt was considered the muscle of the Arab world, while Syria was the poetry, providing much of the ideology and propaganda; to change this poetry, there must be physical signs of normalization, such as an Israeli embassy and El Al offices in Damascus. Other differences also exist. Egypt is an ancient civilization, has a homogenous population, and is stable; Syria is a highly unstable, multiethnic, recent state. The Syrian state was able to survive because one foreign enemy--Israel--united the population. With a Syria-Israel peace, the unity of the Syrian state could be in question. For this reason, Israel has to be concerned about the character of the Syrian state.

Another question is that of financing the peace. Who is going to donate \$20 billion or more to finance peace? Most probably, no country will donate such a sum of money, and the entire region will have to turn to the international markets and meet their criteria. But, again, the Supermarket does not care about how the Syrian state looks outside; it cares about what is happening inside.

If Syria joins the circle of peace in the Middle East, the geostrategic balance in the region will be reconfigured. This will further isolate Iraq and Iran, seriously alter the internal politics in Lebanon, and put pressure on Gulf states to establish normal relations with Israel.

ROBERT SATLOFF

The resumption of peace talks clearly reflects Asad's willingness to back down in his demand that Israel publicly accept withdrawal to the 1967 lines as a condition for negotiations. Asad in the larger framework won a significant victory on the territory issue, because the Israeli debate has been reduced to a discussion of the relative merits of the 1923 international border or the 1967 lines.

Why the Peace Talks Have Resumed. Revival of the peace talks revolves around four major factors that came together to convince Asad that his interests are now best served by reengaging Israel in talks and at an unprecedented political level:

Asad's Fear of Barak. Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak is pursuing the peace process in a profoundly different manner than his mentor, the late prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. Barak has chosen to sidestep Asad's game of entanglement in southern Lebanon and has threatened to withdraw from Lebanon unilaterally. This strategy has clearly unnerved Asad. Moreover, Asad probably recalls that, as chief of staff, Barak offered his view that Israel

should retain twelve to fifteen kilometers on the Golan even in the context of peace and should demand from Syria extensive reduction in the overall size of the Syrian army. Only by entering negotiations can Asad learn Barak's real red lines and thereby decide for himself how to react to the challenge Barak poses.

**Cashing In on the Process.** Asad gains considerably by being back in a peace process with Israel. With an agreement, Syria gains increased protection against outside threats, particularly Israel and Turkey. Syria's participation in talks renews American interest in Asad's regime and its survival, which enables it to be a legitimate recipient of international aid.

**The Lion Roars Again.** Rumors of Asad's impending demise have been especially strong over the last three months. In addition, reports of antics of his dysfunctional family all seem to suggest that Asad is an aging despot no longer capable of controlling his family or his nation. Authorizing talks with Israel, at this moment and in this way, will serve to revive Asad's image as a leader in charge, at least on the international scene.

**Stealing a March on Arafat.** In August 1993, Rabin proposed to Asad that Israel and Syria move to reach a peace agreement. Asad wavered on this proposal and Rabin turned to the Palestinian track. Since then, despite moments of promise in Syria-Israel talks, Arafat has held fast to center stage, while Asad has been relegated to the mezzanine. But Asad no longer wants to be a side-man. With just over two months to go before the deadline for the framework agreement on Israeli-Palestinian permanent status, Asad's willingness to renew talks without a public Israeli acceptance to return to the 1967 border turns the tables on Arafat and ensures that the energies and resources of Barak, President Bill Clinton, and the international community will first be expended on the Syrian negotiations, with only the remainder available for the Palestinian track.

**The Components of a Peace Deal.** Since 1991, Syria has been willing to compromise on some aspects of negotiations: direct talks, agreement that the aim of negotiations is a treaty of peace, and redefinition of the concept of "comprehensiveness" to mean the conclusion of Syria-Israel peace. The parties reached agreement on a "nonpaper" outlining principles governing security arrangements, and reportedly defined twelve of eighteen components of "normal, peaceful relations." Yet, the two sides never reached any agreement on the details of security arrangements, on plans for water management, or on the pace and order of implementation. Nor did they have any serious discussions with the United States or other international donors as to the financial and/or military contribution outside parties will be asked to make.

**For Israel.** An agreement with Syria requiring Golan withdrawal makes sense only if Israel is significantly better off after peace than it is now. For Israeli strategists, the Golan is a means to an end (greater security), not a matter of ideology. But Israeli public opinion does not necessarily accept this idea. Although Barak has already begun the campaign for the national referendum he promised, he will need Asad as a partner. To convince the Israeli public of Syria's serious intent, Asad--not Syrian foreign minister Faruq al-Shara--must sign the final agreement.

**For Asad.** Peace with Israel must somehow validate Asad's steadfast refusal to make peace for the past twenty years--his refusal to follow Egypt's model and be drawn into the sort of peace that, in his view, got Sadat killed. This can be done either by getting a better deal than Sadat got, giving Israel less than Sadat gave, or both. The demand for the June 1967 borders reflects the former; haggling over symmetry, balance, and equity in security arrangements, and defining normalization as narrowly as possible, reflects the latter.

**Prospects.** The optimistic view is that Barak's vision of the "constructive dynamism of simultaneity" will compel Palestinians to move forward because the Syrians do, which in turn will compel Syrians to move because the Palestinians do. Barak's timetable foresees a framework agreement for permanent status in February; a Syrian-Israeli joint statement in spring; an Israel-Lebanon understanding on border security arrangements in summer; orderly Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon; a Syrian-Israeli treaty; and a comprehensive agreement for Israeli-

Palestinian permanent status agreements in September, followed by a single national referendum in which Barak presents both the comprehensive agreement for permanent status and the Syrian-Israeli treaty as a package deal, ending the Arab-Israeli conflict as we know it. Barak's vision may work out; he is a man with a mission and the winds of history at his back.

But such plans rarely work out so neatly. Numerous other factors can come into play. Arafat may respond with actions that regain the spotlight; he has numerous ways to gain Barak's attention. In fact, Barak's apparent decision to roll the Palestinian and Syrian deals into a single comprehensive package offers Arafat considerable leverage. Iran may upset the entire apple-cart, through terrorism carried out directly or via surrogates. Hizballah deputies in the Lebanese parliament have already declared they will keep up their battle against Israel at least until the last Israeli soldier leaves Lebanon, and unless Asad clamps a lid on violence in and from Lebanon, Barak will be hard pressed to maintain the momentum of the Syrian-Israeli account. Asad himself may, at some point, decide that the known is safer than the unknown--that benefits of peace are not worth the risk of paying the price. Israelis may decide that Barak is wrong, that they actually cannot stomach concessions on more than one front at one time or that they are not convinced that the benefits of comprehensiveness outweigh the benefits of keeping the Golan. And, given the huge numbers bandied about in terms of financing peace, Clinton may find that he lacks the glue necessary for all this to succeed. In other words, comprehensive peace may be around the corner, but history and prudence caution us to be modest about predicting its imminent arrival.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Erika Reff, David Honig, and Guy Engelman.

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