

# U.S. Interests in Syria-Israel and Lebanon-Israel Peace Agreements

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## Brief Analysis

Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak has identified peace with Syria and Lebanon as a vital strategic objective and, shortly before leaving for Washington, met with Golan residents to remind them that he believes he was elected to achieve that goal. An understanding between Barak and President Bill Clinton about how to advance negotiations on these tracks not only would provide new opportunities for achieving peace along Israel's northern borders but also could raise the prospect of transforming regional alignments in a way that promotes U.S. interests. Just as America's role in Egypt-Israel diplomacy from 1973 to 1979 provided a range of additional benefits beyond those of the bilateral peace treaty -- including developing a strategic alliance with Egypt, undercutting Soviet influence, and containing Mu'ammar Qadhafi's Libya-U.S. support for Israel -- Syria and Israel-Lebanon peace treaties could create opportunities to advance important U.S. interests in the Levant. These could include weaning Syria away from Iran, ending Syrian backing for terrorism, halting periodic Syrian violations of UN sanctions on Iraq, and setting in motion processes that could eventually undermine Syrian influence in Lebanon and force profound domestic change in the tightly controlled Bathist Syrian state.

As in the past, Washington is likely to play an active role as facilitator, mediator, and go-between in any new negotiations between Israel and Syria, and Clinton -- who has already met with Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad more than did any previous U.S. president -- is sure to play an integral role in this effort. In addition to diplomatic skill and political influence, Washington might be called upon to contribute other assets to make peace possible, including the deployment of personnel to staff an early-warning station on Mt. Hermon and/or to organize and provide a peacekeeping force for the Golan. Finally, the United States might be asked to offer Syria economic assistance (through direct aid, investment commitments, contributions from the international financial institutions, or a U.S.-led international donor effort) and the prospect of a more normal relationship between Damascus and Washington as a "sweetener," or incentive, for a settlement with Israel. A new U.S.-Syrian relationship would require Syria to conclude a full peace treaty with Israel and to support the signing of a treaty between Israel and Lebanon, as well as to halt its support for terrorism, disarm Hizballah, and end its role in drug trafficking.

Assessment of U.S. Interests: Washington has long had a strong national interest in advancing the prospects of peace between Israel and Syria and between Israel and Lebanon, but the case for U.S. involvement is less compelling now

than it was during the first and second rounds of Israel-Syria talks (1991-1992, 1992-1996). This is because Syria has, for the most part, been marginalized as a spoiler. A Syrian "veto" over an Israel-Jordan or a possible Israel-Palestinian peace treaty no longer exists. Moreover, owing to its financial problems, Syria has not taken any major steps to modernize its army in nearly a decade; given Syria's economic straits, Asad's recent visit to Russia was more show than substance. Indeed, Syria does not currently have a military option for retaking the Golan; all it has is an option for throwing away its army in a foolhardy military misadventure. Even with his remaining terrorist assets, Asad lacks the ability to cause significant problems inside the West Bank and Gaza as long as Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat is determined to halt terrorist attacks.

Lebanon remains Asad's only pressure point. He can instigate attacks on Israeli forces in southern Lebanon and hold an Israel-Lebanon treaty hostage. With the withdrawal of the South Lebanon Army (SLA) from Jezz in early June, and with many SLA soldiers worried about their future fate, morale in that organization is at an all-time low. Israeli public opinion supports a withdrawal from Lebanon, and Barak has indicated he intends to get Israel out of Lebanon by June 2000. Israel is vulnerable on this front. (Additionally, Asad could resort to international terrorist acts to press his case, but this is unlikely to bring him closer to regaining the Golan or to building a new relationship with Washington.)

> If Syria poses less of a threat today than in the past, then the prospect of turning Syria into a U.S. ally -- a la Anwar Sadat's Egypt -- may be an attractive rationale for substantial U.S. investment in Syria-Israel peace. But here, too, the opportunities are slim. Experience suggests that the cautious, wary Asad will want to limit the domestic and regional implications of peace and will reorient Syria's foreign policy as little as possible as a result of a peace treaty. Thus, the Egyptian precedent will not be repeated -- at least as long as Asad is alive. Asad has a long record of keeping options open and never burning bridges. Thus, he is unlikely to sever his ties with Iran -- or Iraq for that matter. (Though Asad has taken steps to upgrade ties with Baghdad, he never intended to reconcile with Iraq under Saddam Husayn, so the United States will gain little if anything in terms of its efforts to contain Iraq). Furthermore, while Asad might be convinced to dismantle terror camps in Syria and Lebanon, it is unlikely that he will expel these people as he did Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Rather, he will keep them in the Bekaa valley or the Damascus suburbs as pawns to be used, if need be, in the future. As for Lebanon, the regrettable reality is that an Israel-Syria peace treaty is likely only to acknowledge and, to some extent, certify Syrian control, thereby further postponing the emergence of a free and independent Lebanon. Given Asad's long career at the helm, Washington should only expect a significant change in Syrian behavior when he finally passes from the scene. Along the way, it will be useful to remind Asad that the United States has no particular interest in the succession of his son, Bashar, or any other anointed heir, without the strong likelihood of domestic and regional change accompanying that transfer of power.

Implications: If Barak seeks U.S. support to reach peace with Syria and Lebanon, the Clinton administration should stand ready to provide diplomatic and political assistance. There is not, however, a compelling case for offering financial aid to Syria as an inducement for a peace agreement. For Asad, the prospect of regaining the Golan in his own lifetime and removing a major obstacle for his son -- without paying a price in Lebanon or in terms of Syria's relationship with Iran -- should be sufficient incentive to make peace without American financial inducements.

Likewise, if Syria offers a peace based on "full, normal relations" with Israel -- as Asad promised in his press conference with Clinton in 1994 -- then Israel and Syria should be able to work out bilateral monitoring and verification arrangements for a Golan agreement that do not involve the United States in a substantial way. If this proves unattainable, Washington should stand ready, if asked by both sides, to organize a peacekeeping force, headed by a U.S. diplomat, in which U.S. personnel might fill a small number of key slots or serve in a small observer detachment. But there is little justification for sizable numbers of U.S. troops serving as peacekeepers on the Golan

at a time when U.S. forces are already overcommitted around the world; any deployment should be far smaller than the 1,000 or so U.S. troops in the Multinational Force and Observers in the Sinai. Moreover, the United States should not agree to organize a peacekeeping operation until Hizballah has been disarmed, terrorist camps in Syria and Lebanon have been closed down, and terrorists with American blood on their hands (such as the killers of the Central Intelligence Agency's Beirut station chief, William Buckley, and a United Nations military observer, Lt. Col. Richard Higgins) have been extradited to the United States for trial.

> Finally, regarding Lebanon, the United States should not provide Lebanese Armed Forces personnel instruction in combat skills (such as infantry training) as long as its main role is to facilitate Syrian control of Lebanon. Whereas U.S. training of the Lebanese Armed Forces should continue, there is a strong case for restricting this training to skills required for peacekeeping operations for the indefinite future. Moreover, Washington should put the Lebanese government on notice that should there be no substantial progress toward peace with Israel within a given timeframe following the resumption of negotiations (perhaps six months), the provision of U.S. arms and spare parts to the Lebanese Armed Forces will cease.

Michael Eisenstadt is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and co-author of *Supporting Peace: America's Role in an Israel-Syria Peace Agreement* (1994).

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