

The Brink of Peace:

The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations

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Brief Analysis

Yitzhak Rabin was elected in 1992 as prime minister of Israel based on his pledge that he could deliver an autonomy agreement with the Palestinians and that there would be no major deal with Syria. Nevertheless, between 1993 and 1996, two dramatic opportunities arose for an Israel-Syrian peace agreement; both failed.

First Opportunity: August 1993. In his last trip to the region as secretary of state, James Baker convinced Rabin that there might be better prospects for a peace agreement with Syria than he had previously believed. In March 1993, this new outlook was further encouraged by Rabin's first visit to President Bill Clinton, during which Clinton advocated emphasizing the Syrian track of the negotiations. On August 3, Rabin and Rabinovich met with Middle East peace coordinator Dennis Ross and Secretary of State Warren Christopher. During this meeting, Rabin authorized Christopher to present a hypothetical question to Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad: If Israel were to meet Asad's territorial demands, would Asad be willing to meet Israeli demands for a peace treaty and security arrangement based loosely on the peace agreement with Egypt? Asad responded with a heavily qualified yes, accepting such a plan in principle but demanding unacceptable changes to every Israeli demand.

Christopher viewed Asad's response optimistically, a starting point for negotiations. However, Rabin's response was more skeptical and he chose instead to go with the Palestinian track and Oslo. He did not have the luxury of time, as his small coalition was about to shrink with the withdrawal of the Shas party after the indictment of its leader. He realized that negotiations with Asad would be a long, drawn-out process with haggling over each detail. In the end, Rabin would probably have to meet Asad half-way on most of Israel's demands while Syria's demand, total withdrawal from the Golan, would remain nonnegotiable.

The hypothetical package Rabin discussed with Christopher included full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan if Rabin's security demands were met. Although Rabin never made a commitment to the Syrians to stand by this position, he did make a commitment to the United States. After Rabin informed the Americans of the Oslo accords, the Americans agreed to follow that path but wanted Rabin to reaffirm the hypothetical proposal he gave Christopher in August 1993. Rabin assured them that he remained committed. Over time, the hypothetical "deposit" became, in U.S. eyes, a full commitment. Later, after Rabin's assassination, Clinton asked the new prime minister, Shimon

Peres, if he was committed to Rabin's commitment; Peres too, said that he was. This sensitive information remained a closely guarded secret of the few diplomats and statesmen involved in the negotiations until September 1996.

Second Opportunity: November 1995. After Peres assumed the position of prime minister in November 1995, he indicated a willingness to give priority to the Syrian track and put together a swift deal. Asad, however, did not respond with similar enthusiasm. Instead, Peres's style appeared to intimidate Asad, and the more anxious Peres appeared to be, the less willing to negotiate Asad became.

Asad had a number of reasons for not being more forthcoming. Asad got the impression from the Americans that Peres would be more flexible on security issues than Rabin had been; Asad may have had mistaken expectations. In fact, despite his very different style, Peres was a savvy and tough negotiator. Also, Peres's proposals for economic joint ventures went far beyond what Asad was interested in discussing, and they intimidated him far more than Rabin's security issues had. Furthermore, American pleas to make a deal before the Israeli elections did not sway Asad, who failed to see a difference between Labor and Likud and thus saw no need to rush. At the same time, if Peres was as vulnerable as the Americans said, then perhaps he was not the one with whom to make peace.

> Had Asad been more enthusiastic about Peres's proposals, this second opportunity might have produced dramatic results. Yet, within a few months, the opportunity had already disappeared. Terrorist bus-bombings in Israel, the growing Israeli-Turkish relationship, and the events in Lebanon made any peace plan inexpedient for both parties.

Prospects for the Future. Asad does want to make peace with Israel, but he wants to make peace on his own terms. Asad unquestionably envisions a cold peace that would, at best, leave Israel and Syria as rivals. He is very concerned with his place in history. As Syria's defense minister in 1967, Asad was responsible for losing the Golan Heights to the Israelis; as Syria's president, he is now determined to recover it, or at least prove that he tried. Furthermore, he wants a better relationship with the United States. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Syria has been without powerful friends. Negotiating peace with Israel allows Syria to differentiate itself from Iran and Libya, which the United States views as rogue states. Asad wants to be seen as a leader whom the United States needs to consult before it takes sensitive actions in the region. Finally, despite his rhetoric, Asad wants the same economic and territorial benefits achieved by others. Although he has in the past ridiculed Anwar Sadat and King Hussein, he realizes that their peacemaking has brought them tangible benefits, whereas his stance has brought him nothing.

But there are high obstacles to a peace agreement. Although in principle both sides are interested in the precedent of peace with Egypt, the Camp David model cannot be easily applied to an Israeli-Syrian accord. Four countries border the Golan, as opposed to only two in the case of the Sinai peninsula. Military agreements that could work because of the Sinai's vastness and distance from population centers would seem more dangerous to Asad considering Damascus's proximity to the Golan. There is also the matter of the exact border. Rabin's proposal of an Israeli withdrawal was based on an assumption that "full withdrawal" would be to the international border, a few meters east of the Sea of Galilee, but Asad seems committed to a definition of "full withdrawal" that calls for a return to the borders of June 4, 1967.

> Plus, Asad is not Sadat. Sadat could and did make big and bold decisions; the details were less important to him. Asad, on the other hand, does not take a grand approach; for him the details are everything. Furthermore, from a Syrian perspective, any deal Asad accepts will have to be better than the one Sadat brokered at Camp David. Without a better deal, Asad will be unable to justify having waited twenty years for peace.

There are two keys to an eventual peace plan, neither of which appears to be possible in the near future. First, the Israeli prime minister needs to be willing to withdraw from the Golan; Binyamin Netanyahu's position on this issue is not clear. Second, Asad needs to realize the importance of public opinion in Israel; he needs to modify his demands with Israeli public opinion in mind. So far, three Israeli prime ministers, Rabin, Peres, and Netanyahu,

have turned down what Assad has had to offer; Syria clearly needs to do more.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Harlan Cohen.

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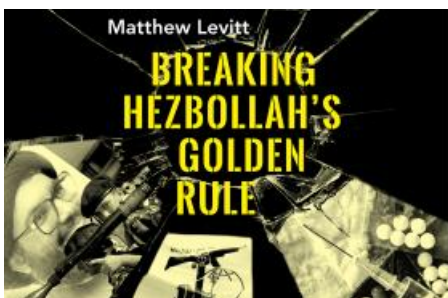
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