

A Syria-Israel Summit: Prospects for Peace

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Policy #241

January 7, 2000

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Peace for Syria is not a tactical move. Pursuing a breakthrough is now declared Syrian policy, and Damascus does not back down from its declared policy. Today, Syria is giving the logic of negotiation precedence over the logic of resistance in its quest to liberate the Golan Heights. If Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak commits himself to certain basic strategic outlines, Syria will show great flexibility. If Israel commits to fully withdraw from the Golan and south Lebanon, then Syria and Lebanon will fully normalize. But if the negotiations in Shepherdstown fail, Syria will not be ready to negotiate peace for a long time; if the logic of negotiation fails to produce the anticipated results, then the logic of resistance will return.

Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad is trying to distinguish himself from the way Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat, and Jordanian King Hussein conducted negotiations with Israel. It is unlikely that Asad will suddenly appear in Washington to help Barak sell a peace referendum to the Israeli public. If a breakthrough is reached in Shepherdstown, however, Asad may surprise us. Notwithstanding, it is not Syria's responsibility to offer Israel confidence-building gestures.

Syria's Position For Syria, the treaty must include:

- Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights to the June 4, 1967 border. The Syrians will most likely not accept the 1923 international border. Whether Syria accepts anything but the June 4 border depends on intricate negotiations on water and security arrangements; a difference of inches or centimeters from the June 4 border is possible. Furthermore, Israeli forces must withdraw from south Lebanon.
- An agreement with Lebanon. Lebanon represents the strategic depth of Syria. The fact that Syria's military presence in Lebanon will act as a guarantor of calm on the Lebanese-Israeli border will force Israel and the United States to acknowledge that Lebanon is Syria's virtual protectorate.
- A comprehensive agreement. Syria will not follow the piecemeal approach to negotiation adopted by the Palestinians. It will only sign onto a transitional accord if it is tightly woven into a final, comprehensive agreement. In order to succeed, a comprehensive agreement must address withdrawal, normalization, water rights, security arrangements, and the timetable for implementation.

Regional Implications Syria can facilitate normalization in the region should it achieve peace with Israel. In particular, a Syrian peace with Israel could moderate Iran and Iraq's position toward the peace process. It is clear that Syria talked to Iran about Hizballah's future and its transformation from a resistance movement to a political party. Therefore, Syria not only holds the key to pacifying the Israeli-Lebanese border, but also the gateway to improved U.S.-Iranian relations.

A Syrian-Israeli peace has the potential to serve as a psychological breakthrough for Arabs and Israelis. But this will not occur if the Palestinian issue is not dealt with fairly. This is not to say that should the Israelis, Syrians, and Lebanese arrive at a peace agreement, they should await the conclusion of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to conclude their own deal. But if a deal with Syria is struck at the expense of the Palestinians, it will be detrimental for Israel. Further, if Israel attempts to play the Syrian and Palestinian tracks against one another, it will undermine the accomplishments of the Syrian-Lebanese track and leave the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict unresolved.

Role of the United States The Clinton administration should be prudent when it comes to giving military assistance to Israel. It is understood that financial and security compensation is necessary to encourage Israel to make peace. But a deal with Syria should not be an opportunity to overload Israel with sophisticated weapons, intelligence, and technology. No one questions the continued strategic alliance between the United States and Israel. Nonetheless, upgrading arms transfers to Israel sends a counterproductive message to a region preparing for peace.

JOEL SINGER

The Peace Equation Israel has no peace with Syria because the calculus of incentives has so far been insufficient

to make the peace equation work. For Syria, the notion of peace with Israel was so problematic that even the prospect of regaining the Golan Heights was insufficient. Implicit in the land-for-peace formula is the notion that Israel pays by giving away territory, while Syria pays by giving away peace. For Syria, making peace was something to which it had to reluctantly agree in order to regain the Golan.

Israel was not willing to make peace because Syria did not offer Israel sufficient guarantees in the spheres of security and normalization. For Israel to give up the strategic Golan Heights, it must emerge from an agreement in a better overall security position. Israel therefore asked Syria to substitute the Golan with security arrangements such as demilitarization, separation of forces, and an early warning station. Syria in the past objected that a demilitarized zone would leave Damascus vulnerable to attack. Syria also rejected an early warning station on the Golan as an infringement on its sovereignty. In the absence of an agreement on security, Israel suggested normalization in spheres such as commerce, transportation, and tourism--similar to the agreements signed with Egypt. Syria objected that it has no such agreements with its Arab neighbors and therefore sees no reason to have them with Israel.

What changed the calculus was Barak's threat to withdraw Israeli forces from Lebanon. For years, Syria has demanded an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon as well as from the Golan. But when Barak proposed such a withdrawal from Lebanon, Syria became concerned that it was going to lose a significant negotiating chip, namely, the ability to threaten Israel with attacks from southern Lebanon.

Steps to Peace The complexity and volume of issues that must be addressed by an Israeli-Syrian agreement cannot be dealt with in one fell swoop. Every Middle East peace treaty has been the outgrowth of an initial agreement that outlined basic principles. For example, with Egypt there was first a Framework Agreement; with the Palestinians, a Declaration of Principles; and with Jordan, a Common Agenda. Such a document may be produced by Israel and Syria in the coming weeks, perhaps as a "U.S. paper."

Some creative compromises will be necessary. For instance, Barak will never agree to return to the June 4, 1967 border as distinct from the international boundary, while Syria has stated that it will not agree to anything but an Israeli withdrawal to the June 4 line. That would seem to make negotiations an exercise in futility. If the two parties are committed to reaching a peace treaty, however, they could find a compromise border and then, taking advantage of the fact that no one has a precise map of where the border was on June 4, 1967, they could name this the "June 4" border.

As a democratic leader, Barak is caught between telling the Israeli public that Israel must make concessions, and telling Asad that no concessions will be granted. While playing poker with Asad, Barak must keep his cards close to his chest so as not to reveal his red lines. At the same time, as an elected leader, Barak needs to prepare his public for upcoming concessions in order to gain their popular backing. Rabin and Peres shocked the Israeli public too much when they made the Oslo agreement; Barak wants to avoid a similar fate.

Asad is unlikely to make a gesture toward Israel because he has a limited number of bargaining chips; making a gesture means giving away a chip that he could otherwise trade for something substantive. Further, the notion of making confidence-building gestures in order to sway an electorate is a foreign concept to a non-democratic leader like Asad. The Syrian president may simply not understand that one simple gesture to the Israeli public can buy more from Israel than the most clever negotiating tactic.

The U.S. Role In every previous Israeli-Arab agreement, supplements have had to be added to make the peace equation work. For instance, U.S. aid was needed to facilitate Egyptian-Israeli peace. To make Syrian-Israeli peace work, the United States will attempt to enlarge the pie of incentives by encouraging other Arab countries to make peace with Israel in tandem with Syria. In this way, peace with Syria will become the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict, a long-sought Israeli goal.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by David Honig.