Does Syria Want Peace? Syrian Policy in the Syrian-Israeli Peace Negotiations

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By examining geopolitical factors, Hafiz al-Asad's overall political goals and strategies, his domestic and international constraints, and the evolution of his policies on peace with Israel, the author argues that Syria has always sought a just peace based on return of the Golan. The author is pessimistic, however, that the new Israeli government under Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu will accept such a settlement.

Syria has long insisted that it wants a peace settlement with Israel. But its policies have been widely seen as actually determined by external or internal constraints, not peaceful intentions. In the 1980s, for example, President Hafiz al-Asad's opposition to certain peace initiatives was attributed to domestic politics—to an authoritarian-minoritarian regime that needed an external enemy to justify repressive rule and the Arab aid it received as a frontline state. And when the Asad regime took Syria into the peace process in the 1990s, it was argued that the policy change had been forced on Syria by the postbipolar external environment. Now that Israel under Netanyahu appears ready to go back on the peace process, pro-Israeli publicists are seeking to shift the blame to Syria and the Arabs. Asad's failure to strike a deal with the Peres government shows, they claim, that he never actually wanted a peace settlement and that his strategy was to keep the process going without ever coming to closure.[1]

This paper will argue that Asad's policy is hostage to neither external nor internal forces. It will show that there are no insuperable domestic obstacles to a settlement and that, regardless of fluctuations in the external power balance, Asad has sought an honorable peace with remarkable consistency. Syria, it will be shown, not only negotiated seriously with Israel but made concessions to help bridge the gap with it.

The Determinants of Syrian Policy

Geopolitical Constants

Syrian policy has been shaped over the long term by certain constants that have little to do with the ups and downs of domestic politics. The historical rejection of Israel's legitimacy is deeply rooted in Syrian political culture. However, revisionist aims have been tempered by the grave national security threat to Syria

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from Israeli military superiority. Although Syria has sufficient forces, including a chemical weapons missile capability, to make an Israeli attack potentially very costly, it has never had more than a very limited offensive capability. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, even its defensive position may well erode.

Israel's seemingly permanent superiority has dictated Syria's gradual acceptance of Israel's reality, if not of its legitimacy. Israel and Syria remain, however, natural geopolitical rivals in the Levant. Syria retains the ambition to make the former parts of historic Syria its sphere of influence, while Israel has sought similar ends in this same area. In the 1980s, the struggle was largely over Lebanon; since Oslo the Israelis have sought to make the Palestinians and Jordan virtual satellites at Syria's expense. Influence in the Levant arguably has become a major stake in the peace negotiations.[2]

These geopolitical factors shape a notion of the national interest that any Syrian regime and most of the public would recognize—a notion that essentially amounts to *success in the conflict with Israel.* However, since the peace process began, the end of the conflict has been anticipated and the national interest has come to be redefined as a matter of whether the resulting peace would be on equitable terms and whether it would allow Syria to contain Israeli hegemony in the region.

The Strategies of the Dominant Decision Maker

The goals and strategies of President Asad make up a second factor shaping Syrian foreign policy. Asad's challenge has been to shape policies that adapt Syria's national interest to the realities of the balance of power. He has done so in a way that arguably approaches the ideal of the rational actor in the realist school of international politics, namely the pursuit of limited, consistent goals, a rational matching of ends and means, and strategic flexibility. The salient features of Asad's approach can be summarized as follows:

- *Limited goals.* Asad discarded Syria's previous aim of liberating Palestine and accepted the need for a peace settlement with Israel in exchange for its evacuation of the territories occupied in 1967. Contrary to conventional opinion, this was not a function of the Gulf War but goes back a quarter century: It was the main issue over which he overthrew his radical predecessors in 1970.[3]
- *Consistency in goals.* Although Asad has accepted Israel, he has sought with great patience over twenty-five years to make peace conditional on a return of Israel to its 1967 boundaries. Unlike other Arab leaders, he consistently refused to settle for less than a comprehensive and total Israeli withdrawal.
- *Matching means and ends.* As a realist convinced that power is what counts in international politics, Asad built up the military capability needed to make his diplomacy credible and to deter Israeli power. As such, even as he scaled down Syria's objectives in the conflict with Israel, he significantly upgraded its capabilities.

- *Strategic adaptability.* Like a prudent rational actor, Asad has adapted Syria's strategies to the balance of power, mixing military and diplomatic means as conditions dictated. Thus, he first sought to retake the Golan through military action in the 1973 war. When this failed, he entered the Kissinger-sponsored disengagement negotiations with Israel. When Egypt's separate deals with Israel undermined Syria's diplomatic leverage, he adopted a policy of "tactical rejectionism." This sought to obstruct efforts to bypass Syria in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict and to suspend the peace process until Syria's drive for "strategic parity" restored a credible negotiating hand. But Asad never abandoned the aim of an "honorable" settlement under UN resolutions.

When the weakening of Soviet commitments under Mikhail Gorbachev deprived Asad of a military option, he took advantage of the Gulf War to win U.S. acceptance of Syria as a responsible power whose interests should be recognized in American Middle East diplomacy. Finally, Asad entered the Madrid peace process. As former Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres put it, he "is conducting the peace process just as one conducts a military campaign—slowly, patiently, directed by strategic and tactical considerations."[4] In short, Asad's realist foreign policy has accepted a peace settlement as compatible with Syrian national interests and has used realist strategies to pursue it.

DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS AND THE PEACE PROCESS

Asad has been able to freely adapt his strategies to the external power balance because he has achieved substantial autonomy of domestic constraints on his foreign policy through a patient process of power consolidation. He concentrated power in a virtually monarchical presidency through a strategy of balancing rival regime pillars and social forces. Under the radical Ba'thists who preceded him (1963–70), the regime had achieved autonomy with regard to the dominant classes by breaking their control over the means of production and mobilizing workers and peasants through the Ba'th party. However, the party, initially a stronghold of rejectionism, put ideological constraints on Asad's diplomacy; he used his control of the army to free himself of these constraints. He then built up a personal core of Alawi followers in the security apparatus to give him autonomy with regard to the army. Economic liberalization incorporated segments of the bourgeoisie into his constituency, making him less dependent on the original regime pillars. Finally, ruthless repression smashed groups—notably the Muslim Brotherhood—which actively challenged the regime.

The result is a virtual presidential monopoly over foreign policy making. It is not subject to bureaucratic politics where hawkish or dovish factions must be consulted and can veto Asad's decisions. Nor can public opinion directly constrain foreign policy. There are certain domestic constraints on the president but they are indirect: Political wisdom dictates that Asad take account of the *domestic* consequences of his foreign policy decisions. However, even these indirect con-

straints—currently, the political risks of involvement in the peace process—are declining.

Intraelite Politics

Asad must presumably be especially sensitive to elite opinion. In fact, he does try to achieve an intraelite consensus on foreign policy and especially on the core issue of Israel. Nonetheless, he is willing to be out in front of elite opinion. Both of these tendencies were apparent in the disengagement negotiations after the 1973 war when he took pains to consult the political elite (in contrast to Sadat's unilateralism) but in the end pulled his reluctant colleagues into the agreement. It is currently unlikely that the elite could unite against Asad if he decides to make peace.

There was apparently some dissent in the top elite over joining the Madrid conference, which accommodated few of Syria's procedural conditions. The Alawi security barons reputedly feared that peace talks could lead to internal political liberalization or a Western realignment at their expense. Asad's attempt to forge a consensus may have accounted for the time lag in accepting the American invitation to the conference, but elite dissent did not deter him from entering the process.

Nor will it deter him from reaching a peace settlement. Some observers thought senior security chief Ali Duba and several of his subordinates had been fired by Asad in 1993 to "remove . . . centers of power that could resist the restructuring of the army in the postpeace era."[5] Actually, General Duba remains in power but a shake-up among his subordinates reflected Asad's policy of preventing clientage networks from congealing into fiefdoms beyond his control. As long as the president keeps a hand on appointments and dismissals, no baron can staff his domain with durable clients and stand against the president.

It is, moreover, not a foregone conclusion that the Alawi and military elites cannot adapt to postwar conditions. The army may fear that its dominant societal role will be threatened by peace and Israeli demands for downsizing. But military elites would retain key positions in the officer corps and security forces even if these are scaled down. The business connections of top officers to the bourgeoisie should allow them to share in any economic prosperity that accompanies peace.

Moreover, the Syrian military was unnerved by the easy defeat of Iraq and is aware that another war (in which it could be devastated) could be the alternative to the peace process. Asad has portrayed the peace process to the army as an honorable struggle: "Our stance in the battle for peace will not be less courageous than our stances on the battlefield."[6]

The Ba'th party might be expected to reject a peace settlement that threatens it with the loss of its nationalist raison d'être. Yet the party has been downgraded, deideologized, and turned into a patronage machine with little capacity for independent action. It has not made key decisions, above all in the foreign policy field, for a long time. Rather, the party largely approves and justifies Asad's policies. The party central committee assembled the regime elite to hear Asad's ex-

planation for entering the peace process and dispersed to justify it to their constituents.

Finally, Asad is incrementally altering the structure of his regime to enhance his autonomy in the transition to peace. He has incorporated more elements of the bourgeoisie more securely into his regime to balance the Alawis and the Ba'thists. Members of old families have been co-opted into government, the chambers of commerce and of industry enjoy growing access to decision makers, and businessmen have been recruited into parliament. A new wave of liberalization measures in the 1990s have accorded the bourgeoisie considerably more personal and economic freedom than heretofore, and it has responded by deferring demands for political power.

Economic Pressures and Opportunities

It is frequently argued that economic pressures have forced Syria unwillingly into the peace process—suggesting that it is not grounded in a strategic change in policy. Actually, there is scant evidence that Asad has ever allowed economic constraints to force foreign policy decisions that he would not otherwise have taken on strategic grounds. In fact, it was in the 1980s when the economy was in crisis that Asad was most implacable in his "tactical rejectionist" policies. By the 1990s, when he joined the peace process, a combination of austerity and the aid windfall from the Gulf War had lifted the economy out of the doldrums.[7]

Moreover, the economic consequences of a peace settlement do not sufficiently and uniformly attract or repel the regime to be a decisive factor in its foreign policy. In the short run, the Arab financial aid to which Syria has been entitled as a frontline state has declined and provides little motive for avoiding peace; as the Arab-Israeli conflict is defused region-wide, and because of the chronic budget difficulties of the Arab oil states, it will continue to decline *regardless* of what Syria does in the peace negotiations. On the other hand, although peace is likely to bring increased investment, the regime is likely to view this as a mixed blessing because, rather than being funneled into state coffers, it will largely bolster the private bourgeoisie—appeasing but also strengthening a social force that the state cannot wholly trust.

The regime faces no pressures from a capitalist class for a peace settlement. Indeed, the Syrian bourgeoisie is ambivalent about peace. Some Syrian businessmen fear Israeli dumping on the internal market. Some believe that Syrian commercial acumen will allow them to compete, while others fear that Syria will face competition from Israel's superior technology in the Saudi and Gulf markets they want for themselves and hope that Asad will obstruct rapid Arab-Israeli normalization.

In the long run, both regime and bourgeoisie realize that with the collapse of the socialist bloc, sustained economic prosperity requires further incorporation into the world capitalist economy. This depends on a peace settlement, since a "no-war-no-peace" situation, isolating Syria from an Arab world at peace with Israel, does not provide a favorable investment climate. In the short run, however, economic calculations have not affected Syria's negotiating strategy.

Sustaining Asad's foreign policy autonomy, regime stability, and a stable peace all depend on the willingness of the bourgeoisie to substitute private investment for declining war rent and an exhausted public sector. In fact, the regime has been able to stimulate enough new private investment to consolidate its economic base. Private investment now exceeds that of the public sector. Local capital has been supplemented by Gulf money, and expatriate capital is testing the waters. This fueled annual growth rates of around 8 percent from 1990 through 1993, and although that has slowed there has been no return to the stagnation of the 1980s.

Public Opinion

Asad's concentration of power has removed foreign policy making from public accountability. So positioned, he has been able to take several unpopular foreign policy decisions deemed necessary on strategic grounds, notably the 1976 intervention against the PLO in Lebanon, the alignment with Iran in the Iran-Iraq war, and the stand against Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait.

However, all these policies were justified as essential to strategy in the conflict with Israel. When it comes to actually making peace with Israel, the regime cannot disregard the need to protect its legitimacy. And such legitimacy as it enjoys rests squarely on its claim to represent the national interest against Israel. No nationalist regime—especially an Alawi-dominated one—can, without grave risk, be seen to accept less than an honorable settlement.

But what exactly does Syrian public opinion expect from the peace process? The vast majority of Syrians, tired of years of conflict and stalemate, have long wanted a peace settlement, although not at any price. In fact, the traditional regime position—comprehensive peace in return for withdrawal from the occupied lands, including the Golan and West Bank—reflected the mainstream Syrian view fairly accurately. A settlement that achieved this, far from being a threat to the regime, would have accorded it a major legitimacy windfall.

However, the best settlement that Syria appeared likely to obtain after the Oslo accords would require it to accept normalization of relations with Israel in return for the Golan while Israel likely retained substantial control over the West Bank at the expense of Palestinian national rights. This is not easy to depict as the honorable outcome for which Asad asked Syrians to sacrifice for a quarter century. If there are Israelis on the streets of Damascus while ferment continues among the Palestinians, especially those in the diaspora, it would be, at the least, politically embarrassing and conceivably delegitimizing for the regime.

If there are Israelis on the streets of Damascus while ferment continues among the Palestinians, it could delegitimize the regime.

This is not to say that public opinion is unchanging. The Syrian media have promoted the economic benefits of peace and have prepared the public for some sort of normalization of relations with Israel. Equally important, there has been a sea change in Syrian public opinion following Oslo. The Palestinians—and then Jordan—reached separate deals with Israel without regard to Syrian

interests. Most Syrians feel that Syria cannot reject a settlement that the Palestinian leadership itself accepts. The regime successfully argued that the PLO's submission to Israel deprived Syria of the diplomatic leverage needed to help win the liberation of the West Bank and Gaza. Many Syrians are now convinced that Syria must give priority to its own interest in recovering the Golan. As Asad lamented on Syrian television: "What can we do since the others have left us and gone forward?"[8] All this put the regime in a much better position to sell the less-than-comprehensive settlement that appeared likely.

There has even been a sort of backlash against Pan-Arab commitments, turning Syrians inward to their own affairs. Israel has always argued that the main obstacle to peace was the Pan-Arab ideology that had pushed Syria to champion more than purely parochial Syrian interests. However, Syrian nationalism still has not become a viable substitute for Arabism, and regime legitimacy remains linked to its defense of Arab national interests against Israeli penetration of the region.

In summary, there are no irresistible societal pressures on the regime either to reject a Golan for peace deal or to make concessions to Israel in order to reach one. This is incompatible with "domestic politics" models in which foreign policy results from the need of the regime to manage internal instability. Rather, geopolitical interests have determined Syrian policy in the peace process.

PROCEDURES AND ISSUES IN THE PEACE PROCESS

The Defeat over Procedural Parameters

Asad entered the peace process with the aim not of abandoning Syria's objectives but of adapting his strategy to new conditions. Because the Gulf War and Soviet decline had shifted the balance of power against the Arabs, he had no alternative to U.S.-sponsored diplomacy and the time seemed right to reap the rewards of his adhesion to the anti-Iraq coalition. While in military terms strategic parity with Israel had receded, Syria might not be at such a disadvantage in a more broadly defined balance, including "international legitimacy" and the U.S. interest in a peace settlement aimed at containing the fallout of the anti-Iraq war.[9] Moreover, the Gulf crisis had allowed Syria to resituate itself at the Arab center and weakened Jordan and the PLO, leading Asad to think he had less to fear from their pursuit of separate deals with Israel. And, if its interests were ignored, Syria could still play the role of spoiler.

Nevertheless, Asad's lack of any real alternative to the peace process meant that he was forced to accept the procedural terms the U.S. offered. These were designed to shape the course of the negotiations to Israel's advantage. As a condition for negotiations Asad long had insisted on a prior Israeli commitment to the principle of full withdrawal. He wanted a united Arab delegation so Israel could not divide the Arab parties, and a full international conference under UN patronage, which could bring international and joint Soviet-American pressure on Israel.

In fact, however, Asad accepted the direct unconditional talks the Israelis wanted. As the Soviet Union's influence declined, so did the prospects for a true international conference that would bring pressure on Israel; increasingly, only American pressure seemed likely to count.[10] Asad did extract from the United States assurances that UN Resolutions 242 and 338 were the legal basis of the peace process and that Washington did not recognize Israel's annexation of the Golan.[11]

Confining Syria to a Bilateral Track

Asad had traditionally insisted that the peace had to be comprehensive. He still aimed to achieve a comprehensive settlement, but his prospects for doing so depended on orchestrating a common Arab front that refused to settle for less, thereby demonstrating that Israel could not otherwise have peace. To this end, Asad hosted several Arab coordination meetings in Damascus. However, a common Arab position proved impossible to coordinate, in part because the Madrid formula specified bilateral negotiations and had a built-in discrepancy between the Syria-Israel track, which aimed at a final status agreement, and the Palestinian one that aimed at a merely interim arrangement. In accepting these procedural terms, Asad was maneuvered into a position where he would have no leverage over outcomes on the Palestinian front and where Israel would be able to divide the Arab parties.

The launching of the multilateral negotiations was another defeat for Syria. Syria refused to attend these negotiations on the grounds that the resolution of issues such as water resources and economic cooperation had to follow, not precede, Israeli territorial withdrawal; otherwise, they served the Israeli attempt to draw the Arab states into normalization without conceding withdrawal. However, the other Arab parties, under U.S. pressure, defied Asad and participated in the multilateral talks. While the Gulf Arab states assured Syria they would sign no agreements with Israel, they lifted the secondary economic boycott.[12] This substantially undercut the leverage Syria would get from its ability to veto Arab-Israeli normalization. Despite his rapid loss of control over the peace process, Asad had invested too much political capital to withdraw.

Syria's Marginalization from the Palestinian Cause

Syria had long insisted that peace had to achieve Palestinian rights. These rights were interpreted to require total Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, a Palestinian state on this land, and the right of refugees from Israel proper to "repatriation or compensation." While Syria usually held that the Palestinians themselves would decide what sort of solution satisfied their national rights, Asad permitted Palestinian rejectionist factions in Damascus to insist the PLO negotiate for full Israeli withdrawal, not mere autonomy.

Asad long insisted Syria would not make a separate settlement: "Had Syria thought of its own interest only . . . it would have achieved a unilateral solution. . . . But it did not and will not do this. The Golan was originally occupied in a battle waged for Palestine."[13] Asad's insistence, in talks with U.S. Secretary of

State Warren Christopher, that Syria would not conclude a separate settlement apparently convinced Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin that his initial "Syria first" option would not fly.[14]

Ironically, this led Rabin to pursue the 1993 Oslo agreement with the Palestinians. Syria believed this agreement was deeply flawed: There was no end to the occupation, no right of return for the refugees, no Arab right to Jerusalem. Syria and its Palestinian allies questioned Yasir Arafat's authority to reach such an agreement without the consent of the Palestine National Council. Asad insisted that "If Syria wanted to obstruct the agreement it would have foiled it, and if it becomes clear to us that this agreement will create major damage, we will do so."[15] But he could do little to oppose Oslo without jeopardizing Syria's inclusion in the peace process.

The Oslo accord and the subsequent separate agreements that Israel reached with Jordan and the PLO precipitated a Syrian retreat from its demand for comprehensive Israeli withdrawal. If the PLO accepted less than full withdrawal on the West Bank, could Syria credibly insist on more for the Palestinians? Syria had been excluded from negotiations over Palestine by the PLO as much as by Israel. As such, Syria could negotiate only for the Golan, not on behalf of Arafat or King Hussein.[16]

Syria's initial fallback position appeared to be that Israel could have a peace treaty in exchange for withdrawal from the Golan but that Syrian-Israeli normalization would require that Oslo develop into a credible solution for the Palestinians and be phased with progress on the West Bank and Gaza. Alternatively, if this proved unrealistic, the regime could accept a settlement but insist that the ideological conflict with Israel would continue until an adequate resolution of the Palestine issue was reached.[17] As the Palestinian and Jordanian tracks advanced, Asad could not readily afford to be left behind; by 1994, he appeared ready to cut his losses and concentrate on recovery of the Golan. As Syria was excluded from the Palestinian issue and Jordan pursued its separate course, the importance of Syria's position in Lebanon increased. An Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, leaving Lebanon within Syria's sphere of influence, became, from Syria's point of view, an integral part of any Syrian-Israeli settlement.

The Golan-for-Peace Equation

Syrian-Israeli negotiations soon became focused almost exclusively on the Golan-for-peace equation. Asad's nonnegotiable condition for peace is return of the whole Golan Heights. Israel wants to keep part of the plateau as a security buffer, because of its settlements there, and because of the Golan's extensive water resources. But Asad, who as defense minister during the 1967 war bears considerable responsibility for the Golan's loss, cannot settle for less than the whole. He needs the entire territory back both for symbolic reasons (to recover the lost honor of the 1967 defeat) and for security reasons. The Golan constitutes an essential defensive buffer against Israel, whose presence on the plateau threatens Damascus. The some 100,000 Syrians expelled from the area (with natural increase, now over 400,000) are a permanent constituency on behalf of full

recovery.[18] "Every Syrian believes," Asad proclaimed to a Western reporter, ". . . that whosoever yields a part of his land is a traitor, and the fate of traitors is well known."[19] Still, Syria has shown increased flexibility over the terms for the Golan's return. As long as Syrian sovereignty on the Golan and its ultimate return is guaranteed in advance, there could be a phased settlement and demilitarized zones and peacekeeping forces on the plateau.

What did Asad offer Israel in return for the Golan? Israel demanded a "full peace" entailing "normalization of relations": diplomatic relations, trade, and tourism. Syria has offered Israel a peace treaty, but its negotiator, Muwaffak al-Allaf, has insisted that Syria is not legally obligated under UN Resolutions 242 or 338 to accept open borders and free trade; these could only be the result, not the precondition, of peace. Normalization cannot be imposed, as Egyptian-Israeli relations ought to have shown.[20] But were confidence between the states to grow, and if Israel conceded Palestinian rights such as repatriation or compensation, Syria would reciprocate with full normalization. Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara' has declared that once peace was established Syria would be ready to do "everything that is usually done in international practice" to normalize relations; but this practice does not require a "warm" peace.[21] Syria wanted to keep the peace as cold as possible and phase normalization over as long a time period as possible.

Israeli and Syrian views of the postpeace Middle East also clash. Israel wants peace to permit its incorporation into the Middle East. Syria aims to roll it back to and contain its influence within its pre-1967 lines; Syria fears that the sort of peace shaping up will absorb Jordan, the Palestinians, and Lebanon into Israel's sphere of influence at the expense of Syria's regional ambitions.[22] In January 1994, Vice President 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam declared that the idea of a Middle East market aimed to give Israel control of Arab resources and "finish the Arabs off as a force. . . . We refuse to have Israel as part of the Arab world." The Arab world was a distinct nation, homogeneous in culture, values, and interests; Israel could no more be assimilated into it than Morocco or Turkey were being accepted into the European Union.[23] In Syria's view, "the Arabs' very existence and civilization is threatened by the illusion of a merger with the 'Middle East' designed to drive the last nail into the coffin of Arab nationalism and Arab unity."[24]

THE SYRIAN-ISRAELI NEGOTIATIONS PROCESS

The peace process, Ba'th party assistant secretary Abdullah al-Ahmar told the party ranks, "is an extension in new form of the liberation battle, appropriate to the new circumstances in the world . . . ."[25] Indeed, Syria and Israel both initially viewed the peace process as a zero-sum game. Mutual concessions, however, brought their positions closer together, and by the mid-1990s, they seemed to acknowledge that both could benefit from a settlement. Nevertheless, the negotiations remained a power struggle over the shape of the peace.

Little progress was made until the election of the Rabin government when, at the sixth round of the negotiations in August 1992, Israel acknowledged that UN

Resolution 242 applied to the Golan. But against Syria's attempts to get Israel to commit to full withdrawal, the Israelis insisted that it would be "on," not "from" the Golan. UN Resolution 242 merely called for "withdrawal from territories" (not "all the territories") to "secure and recognized borders," and Israeli security required adjustments of the borders. Israel would not detail the extent of withdrawal until Syria committed itself to a "full peace." Moreover, Israel demanded that Syria abandon its insistence that a Syrian-Israeli agreement be contingent on settlement of the Palestinian issue.

In the sixth round, Syria offered a peace treaty in return for Israeli evacuation of the Golan, dropped its insistence that evacuation precede a treaty, and acknowledged that Israel's security concerns had to be addressed. But Syria continued to reject the possibility of partial withdrawal: UN Resolution 242, in affirming the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force," clearly required full Israeli withdrawal. Moreover, Israeli commitment to full withdrawal had to come before Syria would commit itself to detailing the nature of peace. Asad feared that discussing normalization would encourage the Arab states to normalize relations with Israel. Moreover, since normalization would be difficult to sell at home, he did not want to commit himself to paying this price without the certainty of full withdrawal in return.

Asad's readiness to continue the peace process despite Israel's December 1992 expulsion of the four hundred Palestinian Islamists and his cooperation in the resolution of the summer 1993 southern Lebanon crisis led Israel to view Asad, according to Foreign Minister Peres, as a serious negotiating partner who wanted peace. Syria was actually portrayed as a bulwark against the spread of "Khomeinism," which Rabin considered Israel's main security threat.[26] Still, Peres declared that "Asad's idea of peace is presently technical—without diplomatic relations or open borders. That is not peace. For that a much lower price than Asad expects should be paid."[27] Christopher brought to Israel the message that Asad understood that peace would not be merely signing a piece of paper or confined to a state of nonbelligerency.

To break the impasse, Syrian negotiator Allaf put forth a formula under which the more land Israel conceded the more peace it could have: A total peace could be had for total withdrawal. Israel said that the depth of withdrawal would correspond to the scope of peace. Israeli negotiator Itamar Rabinovich explained that Israel's refusal publicly to offer full withdrawal only meant Israel would not pledge it in advance. Syria insisted that any explicit announcement of its readiness for full peace was conditional on a clear timetable for full withdrawal. Israeli deputy foreign minister Yossi Beilin observed that considerable overlap in the positions of the two sides now existed. But each side wanted the other publicly to commit itself first.

The September 1993 PLO-Israeli accord stalled progress in the Syrian-Israeli

negotiations and may have aborted an agreement. Rabin declared that it was preferable to have a partial withdrawal on the Palestinian front to a full one from the Golan and that the Oslo Accord gave Israel "freedom of maneuverability" toward Syria. Israel would have to digest the PLO deal before moving on the Syrian track.[28]

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The PLO-Israeli agreement also undermined Syria's leverage by precipitating a rush toward normalization. Syria called for the Arabs to stand firm on the economic boycott against Israeli "penetration of the Arab market and soul." Any Arab state that normalized with Israel would be serving its attempt to impose hegemony on the Arabs. Israel aspired to use its tame Palestinian entity to become the nucleus of a new Middle East order excluding Syria.[29]

Israel, sensing that it had acquired new leverage from the Oslo Accord, pressed for a summit with Asad: Peres announced that to get an Israeli withdrawal comparable to that in the Sinai, Asad would have to deal with Israel as Sadat had done. Syria believed a summit would facilitate Israel's campaign for normalization without withdrawal. Asad insisted that "peace requires long and arduous discussions that cannot be carried out at summits. Peace may bring such meetings but such meetings cannot bring peace."[30]

Syria looked to the January 1994 Clinton-Asad meeting to restart the Syrian-Israeli track. At this meeting, Asad agreed to "establish normal relations in the area" but refused to specify what this entailed: "We will respond to the requisites of peace. But this . . . will hinge on the discussions at the negotiation table, not here at this press conference." Clinton announced that Asad had made a firm commitment to normalize relations with Israel—meaning open borders, free trade, and diplomatic relations. Rabin, however, interpreted Asad to have made normalization conditional on Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza.[31]

Rabin's interest in the Syrian track revived in 1994 as negotiations with the PLO bogged down. The Israeli press was full of claims that Rabin had accepted the principle of full withdrawal from the Golan. Rabin publicly stated that peace was more important than keeping certain settlements on the Golan. However, he committed himself to submitting any treaty with Syria to a public referendum. This was to force Asad to appeal for peace directly to the Israeli public, but it also entailed the risk that Syria might make difficult concessions to reach an agreement only to have it rejected by the Israeli public. Syria feared that Israel's hints of full withdrawal were merely tactical in order to prevent the Syrians from undermining the Oslo agreement and to pressure Arafat with the prospect of being bypassed on the Syrian track. Asad summarized the situation as he saw it: "We said full peace but Rabin hasn't said full withdrawal."[32]

The Americans persuaded both sides to leapfrog a formal agreement on the core issues and begin negotiations in 1994 on secondary matters that would have to be resolved in any actual withdrawal. One such issue was the meaning of full Israeli withdrawal. Syria argued that it meant an Israeli return to the borders before 1967, which left Syria some access to Lake Tiberias. Israel insisted that the international boundary meant the pre-1948 borders, which placed the lake en-

tirely in its territory: Syria could not be allowed to return to the northern shore of Lake Tiberias, Israel's water reserve. The Golan itself, moreover, is rich in scarce water resources, and the headwaters of the Jordan River, which Israel uses extensively, rise in the Golan. Israel insisted that an agreement on the sharing of these resources would be required, which Syria conceded.[33]

Timing was a major stumbling block. Israel proposed a three-stage Golan withdrawal over five years: After a minor pullback (from certain Druze villages), Syria would have to establish diplomatic relations with Israel and satisfy Israel that it was implementing normalization before further withdrawals. Syria wanted full withdrawal within a "reasonable" time frame of about a year. Pointing to Israel's reluctance to fulfill the Oslo Accord, Asad rejected any agreement that left the outcome to Israel's discretion and refused normalization prior to full withdrawal.

As Israel inched closer to agreeing to a full withdrawal from the Golan, it insisted on security substitutes for territory. Its maximum position included dismantling Syrian chemical weapons and a radical reduction (by perhaps one-half) in the Syrian standing army. While Syria's regular army is much larger than Israel's, such demands would demolish Syria's deterrent posture given Israel's nuclear monopoly and Syria's inability rapidly to mobilize reserves.[34]

Israel also wanted a limited forces zone requiring a virtual Syrian pullback to Damascus. Syria accepted demilitarization of the Golan but wanted equal limited forces zones on both sides of the border, which Israel refused.[35] In June 1995, Syria conceded that demilitarized zones would not have to be equal, conceding a 10-6 ratio in Israel's favor, and Israel reputedly accepted much reduced limited forces zones. The negotiations stalled over an Israeli demand for an early-warning station on Mount Hermon. Syria insisted that aerial or satellite surveillance was adequate and that a continued Israeli presence there would be an affront to Syrian sovereignty. To Asad, Israel's insistence on this obviously unacceptable concession was evidence that Rabin was not yet ready to reach a settlement. The negotiations were given a new boost by the change of leadership in Israel after Rabin's assassination: Prime Minister Peres seemed more interested in a settlement with Syria. However, no breakthroughs were forthcoming and the 1996 Hamas bombings in Israel and the Israeli election campaign prompted Peres to suspend negotiations.

The May 1996 Likud election victory put an Israeli-Syrian peace settlement in grave jeopardy. However, the claim that Asad failed to reach an agreement with the Labor government because he never wanted one does not stand scrutiny. If he was not serious about peace he need never have made the many concessions which put an agreement within striking distance. It was Israel, not Syria, that suspended the negotiations.

Syria's intentions have been questioned because it hosted the offices of rejectionist groups, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, whose terrorist attacks in Israel arguably contributed to the election of Netanyahu. However, these groups are not under Syrian control; they are indigenous to the occupied territories, and their violence is essentially a function of rage at Israel's reluctance to evacuate

these areas. For Syria, Islamist violence is a legitimate expression of national resistance to occupation. Far from being a manifestation of Syrian rejectionism, Syria has viewed their activism as strengthening its hand in the peace process by demonstrating that Israel cannot have both land and peace.

It can more plausibly be argued that Asad erred in not reaching an agreement with the Labor government. However, there is no evidence that the many concrete differences between the two sides had actually been resolved when negotiations were suspended. Asad refused to allow Israel to use the possibility of a Likud victory to stampede him into further concessions or into a vague, piecemeal, and open-ended agreement like Oslo. Syria's negotiating strategy has always been to insist on detailed, comprehensive, and ironclad agreements; Israel's arbitrary interpretation of the Oslo accords at the PLO's expense could only have reinforced Asad's determination not to be similarly trapped. Specifically, he would accept no agreement without a definite timetable for Israeli withdrawal or one which left withdrawal contingent on Israeli satisfaction with the progress of normalization.

If, as seems likely, Netanyahu refuses to return the full Golan Heights to Syria, there is little chance of a Syrian-Israeli peace. Asad will probably decide to bide his time until there is a further change in Israeli leadership or strategy or a favorable shift in the balance of power. Syria still retains considerable leverage in Middle East peace diplomacy. Arguably, without Syria's imprimatur no Arab-Israeli peace can be legitimate and hence durable. If its interests are not satisfied, Syria can obstruct Israel's full incorporation into the Middle East; if the Likud backpedals on Israel's commitments to peace, it will enhance Syria's ability to force a halt in further Arab-Israeli normalization. If the Likud government's main concern is security, a peace agreement with Syria offers the most practical opportunity to neutralize the main military threat Israel faces. The threats of Islamic fundamentalism and Israel's vulnerability to chemically or biologically armed missiles could also be much reduced by a Syrian peace. If Syria remains excluded from a settlement, it can continue to threaten Israeli security in small but bothersome ways. Asad could encourage Hizballah pressure on Israel's "security zone" in Lebanon. He could attempt to mobilize the significant numbers of diaspora Palestinians abandoned and embittered by the Oslo agreement. Anti-Oslo groups such as Hamas and Ahmad Jibril's PFLP-GC can pull off spectacular anti-Israeli operations. Such a strategy would be risky, but Syria probably retains a sufficient military deterrent against Israel to make it less than suicidal. Finally, Syria can continue to exploit Washington's belief that the main threats to regional stability, Iraq and Iran, could be neutralized if Syria was pulled into a peace settlement;[36] conversely, a Syria alienated from the peace process, in alliance with Iran, and potentially Iraq, could conceivably destabilize the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

Asad is undoubtedly ambivalent about the kind of peace with Israel that seems attainable after Oslo. Syria could lose its "frontline" regional role and

much of the Arab aid to which this has entitled it, although refusal of a reasonable settlement would probably jeopardize what little aid it still gets. The Palestinians and Jordan may be pulled into an Israeli sphere of influence, although this is perhaps already a fait accompli. The alliance with Iran and hegemony in Lebanon might be put at risk. Syria's economy could be threatened by Israeli penetration. And Asad is concerned about his place in history as an Arab nationalist.

Yet Asad has consistently sought an end to the conflict, only altering his strategies to match fluctuations in the power balance: Participation in the peace process has represented the only alternative to Syria's marginalization. The benefits of peace would include recovery of territory, access to Golan water, the security gained from Israeli withdrawal from the Golan, greater access to the Western-dominated world market, greater private capital investment, and possibly an international aid package. By 1994, the Syrian-Israeli negotiations were no longer about whether there would be peace but over its terms.

The view that Asad's regime needs the conflict with Israel for internal purposes is thus highly exaggerated. Far from allowing Syria's policy to be shaped by domestic politics, Asad enjoys substantial autonomy in foreign policy making. Moreover, he made the internal alterations needed to preserve regime autonomy and stability in an era of peace. By diversifying and broadening the regime coalition, he enhanced his ability to balance above it. Economic alternatives to war "rent" were fostered by economic liberalization.

Of course, Asad has to calculate whether the Arab nationalist basis of regime legitimacy can be shifted without jeopardizing stability. The sort of peace settlement which seemed attainable was probably a legitimacy liability, but it was rendered less dangerous by a decline of Arabism in Syria. The regime has clearly been seeking, with some success, to compensate for reduced nationalist legitimacy through greater economic prosperity and political decompression. If Israel wants a peace settlement with Syria, the window of opportunity for it remains open.

NOTES

1. Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Syria's entry into the peace process has not forced Pipes to alter his argument; indeed, every time there is a stalemate in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations, he attributes it to Asad's interest in keeping the process going without ever coming to closure.

2. Patrick Seale, "La Syrie et le processus de paix," *Politique Etrangere* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1992), pp. 785–96.

3. Despite Israel's defeat of Syria in the 1967 war, radicals in the Ba'th leadership opposed any political settlement and proposed carrying on a guerrilla war for the liberation of Palestine. Asad argued that the Syrian army could not repulse the Israeli retaliation this would bring on and that Syria had to concentrate on the more realistic goal of recovering the Golan. This split eventually led to Asad's overthrowing his radical rivals.

4. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 3 August 1993.

5. Robert K. Lifton, "Talking with Asad: A Visit to the Middle East in Transition," *Middle East Insight* 10, no. 6 (September–October 1994), pp. 8–11.

6. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 3 August 1993.

7. David Waldner, "More than Meets the Eye: Economic Influence on Contem-

porary Syrian Foreign Policy," *Middle East Insight* 11, no. 4 (May–June 1995).

8. *The Middle East*, September 1995, p. 8.

9. Ghayth N. Armanazi, "Syrian Foreign Policy at the Crossroads," in Youssef Choueri, ed., *State and Society in Syria and Lebanon* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1993), p. 117.

10. Zuheir Diab, "Have Syria and Israel Opted for Peace?" *Middle East Policy* 3, no. 2 (1994), p. 83.

11. *Middle East Mirror* (MEM), 15 October 1991, p. 8 and 16 October 1991, p. 14; BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 20 July 1991.

12. MEM, 13 and 14 November 1991.

13. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 8 May 1990, p. 31.

14. *Middle East International* (MEI), 5 March 1993; *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 March 1993.

15. MEM, 4 October 1993; BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 21 and 24 September 1993.

16. Interview, Syrian deputy minister of foreign affairs, Damascus, July 1994.

17. Diab, "Have Syria and Israel Opted for Peace?" p. 81.

18. Muhammad Muslih, "The Golan: Israel, Syria, and Strategic Calculations," *Middle East Journal* 47, no. 4 (Autumn 1993), p. 621–27; Stephen Zunes, "Israeli-Syrian Peace: Long Road Ahead," *Middle East Policy* 2, no. 3 (1993), p. 63.

19. Interview, *Time Magazine*, 30 November 1992, p. 49.

20. *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, November 1992, p. 12; BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 18 December 1992.

21. MEI, 18 March 1994.

22. Zunes, "Israeli-Syrian Peace," p. 64.

23. MEM, 17 November 1993, pp. 11–16 and 5 January 1994, pp. 9–10.

24. MEM, 9 December 1993, p. 15.

25. MEM, 16 November 1993.

26. *Insight Executive International*, April 1993.

27. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 4 August 1993.

28. *Ha'Aretz* in MEM, 10 January 1994, p. 6.

29. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 27 September 1993 and 11 November 1993; MEM, 23 November 1993.

30. Interview, *Time Magazine*, 30 November 1992, p. 49.

31. MEM, 21 January 1994.

32. MEM, 10 March 1994, p. 11.

33. James Moore, "Israel-Syria: So Close and Yet So Far," *Middle East Policy* 3, no. 3 (1994), pp. 76–77; Muslih, "The Golan," p. 621.

34. Moore, "Israel-Syria," pp. 76–79.

35. Ibid., 78–79.

36. Alon Ben-Meir, "The Israeli-Syrian Battle for Equitable Peace," *Middle East Policy* 3, no. 1 (1994), pp. 70–83.