



## NEGOTIATING WITH SYRIA: A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT

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*The following is an account by Israel's former chief negotiator of the Israel-Syria peace talks initiated at the Madrid Conference in 1991. The author contrasts his experience with that of his successor, Professor Itamar Rabinovitch, to reveal the difficulties of negotiating with Asad's regime and the different approaches favored by Likud and Labor governments.*

When I was appointed head of Israel's delegation to the talks with Syria in October 1991, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir gave me few instructions. Of course, we very much wanted to end the state of war and belligerency between Israel and Syria. But Damascus remained an enigma, and its regime breathed hostility at every turn. All we knew about the Syrian position was what the American secretary of state Jim Baker had seen fit to divulge, which amounted to very little. President Hafiz al-Asad's readiness to negotiate directly with us was in itself a breakthrough of sorts. Beyond that, the Syrians focused emphatically on two subjects: first, they insisted on treating the format of the proposed negotiations as an international conference; second, they defined the objective of the conference as the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 242 (October 1967), the contents of which they condensed in the equation of "territory for peace."

My colleagues and I therefore decided that we would try to discover what, if any, change had taken place in the Syrian government's notoriously hard-line, rejectionist attitude toward Israel. We would then attempt to understand what the Syrians meant by peace and what they envisioned in a settlement with Israel. Beyond that, we

would play it by ear and make our recommendations as the talks advanced.

The very first round of negotiations in Madrid, on the last day of October 1991, gave us an indication of what the Syrians had in mind. The head of the Syrian delegation, Muwafiq 'Allaf, came straight to the point. "We have come here for the purpose of implementing UNSC Resolution 242, the essence of which is 'territory for peace'; accordingly, we are ready to undertake to carry out our part of the equation as soon as we hear from you that Israel is ready to withdraw from all the Arab territories you conquered in the June 1967 war".

These words set the tone and agenda of our Syrian interlocutors throughout the talks. Withdrawal assumed the weight of a mantra. Syria's definition of peace, however, remained evasive and unclear.

We attempted to establish a common basis from which we could move on to substantive issues. We explained that before addressing the thorny issues of borders and normalization—which we had no intention of evading—it was necessary to establish some symmetry between the two sides. We proposed, for instance, that both states begin by recognizing each other's right

to exist; that both sides refrain from engaging in, or supporting, military or violent activities against each other, at least during the negotiations; and that we discuss and agree on elementary confidence-building measures, such as establishing direct lines of communication and moving the talks to the region itself.

The Syrian response was negative. Withdrawal was, and should be, the first item on the agenda. It would be a precondition to any progress, the key to any agreement, and there could be no bargaining on territory, which the Syrians considered theirs by right, to the very last inch. As for confidence-building measures, 'Allaf said these could be a result of the negotiations and not a precursor.

We did not give up. As long as the Syrians were ready to maintain the dialogue, we would continue. Apparently, they believed that the talks in themselves would improve their image in the West and open doors there. They refused to move the venue from Madrid, and later from Washington, to the Middle East. We were determined to keep up the exchanges, extract substantive responses from them, and discover their ultimate objectives.

As we expected, 'Allaf consistently harped on Resolution 242 as the blueprint for a solution. All we had to do, he said, was to examine closely every word in that resolution and then devise ways and means of putting them into effect. We agreed to conduct jointly an exhaustive analysis of the resolution. Our legal advisers exchanged detailed discourses, each enlisting arguments that had been published during three decades by eminent jurists, supporting two radically different interpretations. Our interlocutors focused on the phrases that referred to "withdrawal from territories occupied" and

argued that all other matters would fall in place once Israel agreed to carry out the withdrawal requirement. We countered that the resolution linked withdrawal to the establishment—by negotiation and agreement—of secure boundaries. Our response fell on deaf ears.

Toward the end of my term as chief negotiator in April 1992, we made an attempt at piercing the Syrian wall with a document, a "non-paper" in diplomatic jargon. It set down some very basic requirements, taken mostly from the UN Charter. We explained to 'Allaf that the paper was an attempt to define the most minimal basis of a relationship between two states that want to move from a state of war toward peace. We were trying to determine if there was anything on which both sides could agree. This, in turn, could pave the way for another round of written exchanges that would narrow differences and construct a building block on which subsequent layers could be erected. After much hesitation, 'Allaf condescended to take the paper and promised he would come back with a Syrian response.

A month later, general elections in Israel brought down the Likud government. The Labor government under Yitzhak Rabin appointed Professor Itamar Rabinovitch as chief negotiator with the Syrians.

A professor of history of the Middle East, author of several books on the Arab-Israel conflict and an expert on Syria, Rabinovitch was equipped with the necessary academic expertise for his assignment, although he had no previous experience in diplomatic negotiations. He was personally acquainted with the late prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, and fully supported Rabin's policy on the Arab-Israel peace process, especially with regard to

Syria. Most of Professor Rabinovitch's impressions as a negotiator with Syria are contained in his detailed treatise, "The Brink of Peace," (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1998).

Rabinovitch held the position of chief negotiator until the end of 1995, after which he was replaced for a few months by Uri Savir. The downfall of the Labor government under Shimon Peres in 1996 ended that chapter in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations.

#### ELECTION CAMPAIGN PROMISES

Israel's 1992 election campaign took place during the Israel-Syria negotiations that followed the Madrid Conference. During the campaign, there was one noteworthy event that drew special attention. Both candidates, Likud's Yitzhak Shamir and Labor's Yitzhak Rabin, shared a podium at a mass meeting in the town of Katzrin on the Golan Heights. Shamir reiterated Likud's strong attachment to the Golan and its determination to hold on to it. Rabin was no less hawkish. In a statement repeatedly advertised in the following years by his political opponents and by the Council of the Golan Heights Settlements, he said: "To raise the thought that we descend from the Golan Heights would be tantamount to abandoning, I repeat, abandoning the defense of Israel".

A few months after he became prime minister, Rabin made a 180-degree turn from his previous position, signaling a readiness to consider territorial concessions on the Golan, which was received with bitter disappointment, especially by the residents of the Golan Heights. Their representatives met with Rabin on September 6, 1992, and decided to mount a public campaign aimed at thwarting the government's intention.

Their disappointment with Rabin's policy grew even greater in subsequent months, as Rabin continued to accompany the negotiating process with public concessions to the Syrians. In a radio interview in September, he said that Israel, "would be ready to implement Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, which means acceptance of some territorial compromise..." In November, he went a step further and declared that, "the depth of withdrawal will reflect the depth of peace." Throughout, Rabin's tactic was to broadcast Israel's readiness to withdraw from territory, in advance of any parallel concession on the Syrian side. Clearly, he believed this was the way to break Syrian intransigence and draw Asad into a give and take mode. Conversely, Shamir's approach was to refrain from intervening in the negotiation by issuing public statements, one way or another.

In time, it became evident that Rabin's unilateral concessions encouraged the Syrians to dig in rather than reciprocate. At a subsequent round of negotiations in April 1993, the Syrian delegation came to Washington with instructions to elicit a commitment from the Israelis on total withdrawal and not to divulge what they would be willing to contribute on the substance of peace. (1) Still, Rabinovitch registered satisfaction on the use of the term "full peace" by his interlocutor. Apparently, he had not read the minutes of the talks we had held with the Syrians. Ambassador 'Allaf had repeatedly told us that his country was ready to satisfy our desires regarding peace, but only after receiving a commitment on total withdrawal. But he steadfastly refused to divulge the slightest indication of what he meant by peace.

Rabinovitch confirmed much later what we had found out shortly after the talks

began—namely, that there was no symmetry between the Syrian so-called concession (“full peace”) and their demand for full withdrawal. It was Rabin himself who had pulled the rug from underneath the Israeli delegation when he declared that, “the depth of withdrawal would reflect the depth of peace.”

We had engaged the Syrians on this issue right from the beginning. From day one, the Syrians had incessantly pounded the phrase “territory for peace.” You give us (our) territory, said ‘Allaf, and we will give you peace. We rejected that equation right away, for precisely the same reason—lack of symmetry. We responded that peace was fluid, malleable, and reversible, while territory was concrete and irreversible. Furthermore, we insisted that peace was not for the Syrians to give. Peace should be the common objective of both Israel and Syria to the same extent. Territory, on the other hand, was one of the components in the package, alongside security arrangements, open borders, and normalization, including, for instance, joint projects.

#### SYRIA’S IMAGE

One of the problems that dogged the negotiations was Israel’s perception of Syria and that country’s self-image. Syria’s ruling Ba’ath party had long assumed a posture of Pan-Arab leadership, reflected in the party constitution, in the policies and statements of the Syrian leaders, and in the conduct of the Syrian delegation to the peace talks.

During the Madrid conference and subsequent negotiations, the Syrians tried hard to maintain and lead a united Arab front facing Israel. In time, it transpired that only the Lebanese, whose country was virtually under Syrian control, submitted to Syrian

leadership. The Palestinians and then the Jordanians agreed to hold separate secret talks with Israel in defiance of Asad’s bid for a united Arab front. The Syrians had no choice but to submit to reality. They understood that an attempt to sabotage the other Arabs’ contacts with Israel would further isolate them and alienate the United States.

Yet both Israel and the United States held an inflated view of Syria’s weight and veto power over the other Arab states. Thus, on September 20, 1994, Rabin told Dennis Ross and Martin Indyk that the United States “should ascertain that Syria would not obstruct Jordan’s progress toward a peace treaty.” (2) Time and experience have shown that Rabin’s concern and cautionary message to the Syrians were unwarranted, serving only to inflate the Syrian self-image and potential to cause trouble.

#### “CRACKS IN THE ICE”?

Rabinovitch entitled the third chapter of his book “First Cracks in the Ice,” implying that the Syrians began to relax their rigid stance in the course of the talks. A closer look reveals, however, that the cracks were on the Israeli side.

The Syrians brought with them a document of principles (a “non-paper”), on August 8, 1992, which was the first Syrian reaction to the document we had delivered to ‘Allaf in April 1992. Our document asked the Syrians questions such as: Does Syria accept the legitimacy and right of existence of Israel? Does Syria accept the applicability to Israel of Article 2 of the Charter, which makes it incumbent on members of the UN to accept each other’s sovereign equality, the legitimacy of their statehood and their basic rights as nation-states members of the United

Nations? The Syrian response was never made public. Passages from it were leaked to the Beirut daily al-Manar. According to Rabinovitch, one “had to read carefully through the document in order to establish that it dealt with peacemaking between Israel and Syria”.

This point touches on one of the most acute aspects of dealing with the Syrians, which we had learned from hard experience. ‘Allaf had endlessly emphasized that Syria would not bargain over territory. Yet he expected us to bargain over Israel’s legitimacy and right to exist. We had insisted that recognition of Israel must precede negotiations on the components of an agreement. However, this requirement of ours was swept away by Rabin and his representative. The Syrian reaction to this gesture was to refrain from mentioning Israel’s name in their response to our non-paper.

#### WITHDRAWAL TO THE 1967 LINES

Throughout the exchanges with Syria, during both the Shamir and Rabin administrations, the Syrians harped incessantly on the preamble to Resolution 242, which mentioned the “inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force.” However, when the Syrians presented their position on the border question, they demanded an Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 armistice lines. This would have granted the Syrians slices of Israeli territory that they had conquered by force during the 1948 war. In Syrian eyes, it was inadmissible for Israel to claim, (no less acquire) territory in a defensive war, but it was entirely legitimate for Syria to demand territory it had conquered in an unprovoked attack in 1948.

Asad often complained bitterly to his American guests about the Sykes-Picot agreement that was concluded during the First World War between Britain and France. (3) Asad considered that agreement an arbitrary imperialist act that determined the borders between Syria and Palestine, to the detriment of Syrian interests. But when the delegation I led intimated that the borders between Syria and Israel must be negotiated, so as to take into account security and access to water resources, their Syrian counterpart would hear none of it. For reasons never explained or substantiated, the June 4, 1967 became inviolable and non-negotiable in Syria’s view to this day.

#### PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

In his account of the negotiations, Rabinovitch made repeated references to the need for Syria to engage in public diplomacy and reach out to the Israeli public. This issue reveals a noteworthy characteristic in the Labor government’s approach to the peace process. Rabinovitch consistently tried to get the Syrians to mollify and influence the Israeli public by beaming a moderate, peace-seeking image.

In our exchanges with the Syrians, we had consistently emphasized that Israelis would begin to believe that Syria had made the switch from belligerency to peace if its leaders were to tell the Syrian people, in Arabic, that the time had come to acknowledge Israel’s existence and to work toward accommodation.

By way of demonstrating our point, we brought to the negotiating table a small exhibition of literature, including official Syrian school textbooks that preached hatred of Jews and violence against Israelis. We showed Ambassador ‘Allaf a textbook for first graders (4) that said: “The

Jews are criminal villains...,” or a mathematics textbook (5) that included the following question: “Nine soldiers fled from a Jewish company; how many Jewish soldiers did we kill if the number of soldiers in the company was 17?” In addition we showed the Syrian delegation a book that was being sold in Syrian bookstores written by Syrian defense minister, General Mustafa Tlas. The book, “Fitiir Sahyuun,” recounted the story of a blood-libel against the Jews of Damascus in the previous century, for having slaughtered a gentile child, in order to use its blood for the baking of Passover matza.

‘Allaf’ reacted to our presentation by criticizing us for harping on the past and to assure us that matters would change once we withdrew from the Golan Heights. When we made the point that this hate-mongering had preceded Israel’s conquest of the Golan, ‘Allaf’ responded that Syria was then defending the Palestinians, whose homes and rights had been usurped by Israel.

I could never understand why neither Rabinovitch nor his superiors in the government, nor Benjamin Netanyahu, nor the current government under Ehud Barak, ever saw fit to admonish the Syrians on their persistent public hostility to Israel, even while negotiating a peace settlement with our country.

A historian and an expert on Syria, Rabinovitch must have known that the Syrian institutionalized hatred and violence against Jews and Israel surpassed that of the Arab neighbors of Israel. Yet all he had to say on this issue was: “Syria’s commitment to the issues of Palestine and the Palestinians and its opposition to the state of Israel and its Zionist antecedents have been profound and durable.” (6) Apparently, he made no attempt to elicit from the Syrians some readiness to change their attitude, at the very

least in school textbooks, in the Syrian constitution (which included an attack on Zionism) and in the Ba’ath party platform.

#### NORMALIZATION

Syria’s attitude toward Israel’s existence and policies can best be defined as holding the view that justice was totally on their side and Israel was totally in the wrong. Facing Syria’s rigid, doctrinaire posture, both my delegation and the one subsequently headed by Rabinovitch, placed a high premium on the need to establish normal relations between the two countries once an agreement was concluded.

Israel had been through an exasperating experience on normalization with Egypt. In our eagerness to nail down as many aspects of normalization as possible, we had pressed the Egyptians into signing some 50 memoranda designed to institutionalize normal relations between the two countries on a wide range of levels. The Egyptians agreed as long as the final stage of withdrawal from Sinai was pending. As soon as withdrawal was completed, however, the Egyptians began to drag their feet and to provide excuses for postponing or denying the feasibility of those understandings. By the end of that decade, all those memoranda had been reduced to empty pieces of paper. Pressure on Cairo to live up to those agreements was of no avail. President Husni Mubarak once intimated he had developed an allergy to the word normalization.

Very early on, the Syrians indicated that normalization was not required of them under the articles of Resolution 242. On its part, the Rabin government sensed that it could not justify withdrawal from the Golan unless it could demonstrate to the Israeli public that the Syrians had agreed to normalize relations with Israel. According to

Rabinovitch, the Syrians came to realize at some point that “no peace agreement would be made with Israel without a component of normalization.” He went on to report that, “through hint and allusion, our interlocutors suggested to us that there were several elements of normalization; some of them remained unacceptable to Syria, while others had to evolve over time. We in turn sensed that there was greater flexibility to the Syrian position in that matter...” (7) At a much later stage, Rabinovitch had to report that “the Syrian tendency to minimize normalization and treat it as a necessary evil did not augur well for the quest of an agreement predicated on the quality and depth of peace.” (8)

#### SYRIA'S PERCEPTION OF PEACE

Our exchanges with the Syrian delegation enabled us to form a clearer picture of Syria's basic attitude toward the legitimacy and existence of Israel in the Middle East. Furthermore, it gave us more than a glimpse of what Syria meant by peace with Israel. This, in turn, should help us understand what kind of future Israel could expect following a settlement with Syria along such lines.

In the second round of negotiations, which took place in December 1991, an exhaustive and illuminating exchange took place between the two delegations.

I asked 'Allaf why, when talking to the Arab media, he kept referring to Israel as “the enemy.” I quoted to him a statement in which he had said that, “the state of war (i.e. with Israel) did not begin with the occupation of Arab lands in 1967, but from the moment that Israel was implanted in the heart of Palestine, the Arab homeland”.

In the subsequent exchanges, 'Allaf made remarks that threw some light

on the Syrian perception. Although taken out of context, they nevertheless reflect an attitude and perception worth noting.

--The Arab rejection of the 1947 partition of Palestine can be likened to the biblical story of King Solomon and the two mothers who were fighting over a child. Like the real mother, the Arabs refused to cut their country in two.

--The international community has determined that the only borders Israel can claim are those of the UN partition resolution 181. Nevertheless, the Arabs were willing to accept Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 that clearly determined that Israel should withdraw from the lands it had captured by force in 1967.

--According to Damascus, Israel was the aggressor in all the wars that preceded the June 1967 war. When the Arab states declared war on Israel in 1948, they were reacting to Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people, including mass slaughters and the uprooting of whole villages with their population.

Every once in a while, 'Allaf threatened to appeal to the co-sponsors of the Madrid Conference, Russia and the United States, to intervene because of what he considered a stalemate. I responded that the co-sponsors had fulfilled their role in convening the conference. From then on, it was up to the two sides to reach an agreement. If 'Allaf insisted on turning to the two powers, he could negotiate with them, but not with Israel.

Since it was well-known that Syrian leaders used to declare that Palestine was Southern Syria, I asked 'Allaf whether he could tell us that this was no longer the case? 'Allaf responded that this was an historical fact and asked: Do you want to change history?

In the course of that round of negotiations, two Palestinian terrorists were caught in Israel carrying Syrian identification documents. I asked 'Allaf: are you willing to end the violence against Israel, at least during the peace talks? He answered: are you ready to stop attacking southern Lebanon?

In one instance, 'Allaf referred to our country by the words "what you call Israel." In response, I challenged him: if Israel is illegitimate in your view, why are you negotiating with us? If, on the other hand, you accept Israel's legitimate existence, why don't you say so and enable us to move on to matters of substance? As in other, similar occasions, 'Allaf's response was that our agreeing to withdraw from the Golan Heights would settle the problem.

#### THE HYPOTHETICAL EXERCISE

In November 1991, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker sent a message to Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir in which he proposed a way to prevent a stalemate in the negotiations. We called the proposal "the hypothetical exercise." In essence, the plan was for Israel to ask Syria: "Assuming we satisfy your demands regarding withdrawal, what would be your position on peace and normalization?" Concurrently, Syria would ask Israel: "assuming we satisfy your demands with regard to peace, what would be the extent of territorial withdrawal you would undertake?"

I drafted a response under the prime minister's signature in which we courteously rejected the very idea of a hypothetical exercise. We explained that in order for the undertakings to be truly bilateral, reciprocal, and lasting, Israel and Syria must be allowed to conduct the give-and-take process by themselves. Furthermore, once the Syrians realized that

Israel was capable of entertaining the idea of withdrawal from the Golan Heights--even if it were in the most hypothetical context--they would double their efforts to extract a clear pre-commitment on total withdrawal. Thus, the American proposal could boomerang and grind the process to a halt.

Rabin took the exactly opposite route. In a meeting with Secretary of State Warren Christopher on August 3, 1993, the Israeli leader commissioned the secretary "to explore with Asad, on the assumption that his own demand [i.e. regarding withdrawal] would be satisfied, first whether Syria would be willing to sign a peace treaty with Israel; second, whether Syria was ready for a real peace including normalization; and third, whether Syria was ready to offer elements of peace before completion of withdrawal." (9)

When the negotiations resumed in Washington on August 30, the Syrian representative insisted on "a commitment to an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights." Professing surprise, Rabinovitch characterized 'Allaf's reaction as a "misunderstanding or a misrepresentation of Christopher's mission earlier in August. Rabin was very careful to emphasize to the secretary that he was engaging in a hypothetical exercise...The last thing Rabin had in mind was converting a hypothetical formula deposited with the United States to a commitment..." (10)

Rabinovitch soon realized Rabin's blunder and concluded: "Once 'Allaf realized that he was not about to hear any commitment to withdrawal, the meeting did not go very far." Interestingly, the Americans tried hard to put the best face on Asad's response to the hypothetical exercise. Christopher and his assistant Dennis Ross reported to Rabin that they saw Asad's

response as positive in that he accepted “the basic equation.” But when they spelled out the details of the Syrian president’s response, it came along with a long list of “ifs and buts,” in addition to which Asad told Christopher he had difficulties with the very term “normalization.” (11)

The damage caused by Rabin’s hypothetical concessions was compounded by an element of friction in U.S. relations with Israel. In an interview with Thomas Friedman of the New York Times on September 13, 1993, President Bill Clinton disclosed details of a lengthy phone conversation he had held with President Asad in which he had assured him that the United States would remain involved in the negotiations with Israel. He continued: “Each successive day that the agreement [with the PLO] builds up in strength, I think that that enables the Government of Israel to engage Syria. I personally believe that it is a lot more important than the details of this piece of land on the Golan Heights or anything else.” (12)

## LEBANON

Lebanon was, and continues to be, one of the most confounding issues in the Syrian-Israeli relationship. No settlement with Syria can be achieved until and unless the Lebanese problem is solved in a way acceptable to both Israel and Syria. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon in order to eradicate the PLO forces in that country. Syria’s military and diplomatic position was weakened as a result. But, the Israelis lost patience in the face of growing attacks by Shi’a militias and withdrew to a narrow security zone in the south. While Israel was dealing with these guerrilla attacks, the Syrians resumed their tenacious, determined effort to subjugate the rest of Lebanon. No

real effort was made by successive governments in Israel, or by anyone else, to challenge the growing permanence of Syria’s control of Lebanon.

The Shamir government had adopted the position that the Syrian military presence in Lebanon was a threat that had to be removed in the context of a peace agreement with Damascus. Consequently, we challenged the Syrian delegation to inform us at what point would Syria enable the Lebanese to regain their sovereignty and thus pave the way to a settlement between Israel and Lebanon. ‘Allaf evaded the issue altogether and referred us to the Lebanese delegation.

By 1994, the Rabin government had resigned itself to a perpetuation of the Syrian hold on Lebanon. Thus, in the context of a discussion on the security arrangements that should be instituted on the borders between Syria and Israel, Rabinovitch queried: “How large a force could Syria maintain in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, without posing a threat to Israel?” (13) I find most disconcerting that neither the Netanyahu government nor the Barak government ever publicly demanded that Syria end its occupation of Lebanon in the context of an overall peace settlement.

The U.S. government resumed normal relations with Beirut, consciously overlooking its subservience to Damascus. Both the American and Israeli policies could be characterized as typical of Rabin’s outlook: to negotiate with Syria as if there was no fighting in Lebanon, and to fight in Lebanon as if there were no negotiations with Syria. Of course, this turn of events dovetailed well with Asad’s desires. It legitimized his occupation of Lebanon, while enabling him to apply indirect pressure on Israel through the Hizbullah terror attacks on

the security zone in southern Lebanon. At the same time, it buttressed his alliance with Iran—Hizbullah's patron—and helped stave off Iranian displeasure with Syria's involvement in the peace process.

Rabinovitch probably echoed the Labor government's different view of Asad's clever tactics. He contended that sooner or later, Asad would have to make a choice between Washington and Tehran. (14) Events since then have shown that this was an unsubstantiated assumption. Six years and two major Israeli military operations against Hizbullah later, Asad has proved adept at maintaining a balancing act between Iran, the United States, and Israel. Hizbullah attacks escalated, the Syrian-Iranian alliance has remained strong, Washington did not put pressure on Damascus, and the Barak government tried to resume negotiations with Syria.

#### SYRIA AND THE UNITED STATES

This turn of events in U.S.-Syrian relations caused concern in Jerusalem. As Rabin saw it, Israel had made all the concessions, Asad's response had been disappointing, and in the end, Clinton was assiduously courting the Syrian president, while publicly belittling the importance of the Golan Heights. After an important mediating effort in Damascus, Secretary of State Christopher came away with very meager results. Paradoxically, the United States ended up feeling obligated to Asad and made promises to increase the pressure for more "painful decisions" by Israel.

Asad's intransigence paid off at the time. Clinton compensated him with a meeting in Europe in January 1994 and visited him in Damascus in October of that year. This in spite of the absence of any progress in the peace talks and at a time

when Syria featured prominently in the State Department list of states engaged in international terror.

Rabin's concessions were matched by the Clinton administration's clinging to an optimistic evaluation of Asad's stance. Following the failure of the August 1993 hypothetical exercise, Rabin decided to embark on the Jordanian option. Fearing Asad's rage at being bypassed a second time (the first was the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians), the United States pressed Rabin to reassert the concessions embedded in the hypothetical exercise, in an effort to placate the Syrian president.(15)

Rabin bowed to American pressure. Together with his ambassador, he worked out a sequence of public announcements designed to assure the Syrians that Israel was serious in its undertaking to withdraw from the Golan Heights. But Syria continued to stick to its long-held position that a commitment to total withdrawal was a precondition to any discussion on peace.

The meeting between Presidents Clinton and Asad in January 1994 did not produce any change in the Syrian position. Nevertheless, the American president praised Asad, described Syria as "the key to the achievement of enduring and comprehensive peace," and put the onus on Israel by expressing the hope that Israel would come up with a "positive response" to Syria. Rabin was terribly disappointed. His conciliatory gestures toward Syria had produced the opposite response and had failed to bring the United States around to a stance supportive of Israel.

Contrary to the Rabin-Peres approach, the Shamir administration had impressed upon the United States, with some success, to refrain from engaging in

mediation. At least, this would have limited the friction in U.S.-Israel relations. In any case, Israeli concessions had not produced a breakthrough in the negotiations, while Syria could register some gain in its relations with Washington, even in the absence of progress in the peace process.

#### SHIMON PERES' VISION

Shimon Peres's entrance into the Israel-Syria picture brought about a radical change. He introduced an outlook and strategy that were totally novel to the process. Peres's vision of a "New Middle East" and a Clinton Plan reminiscent of the Marshall Plan for the region, failed to produce a positive echo. Peres and his assistants might have guessed that Arab awareness of Israel's economic and technological superiority would render any suggestion of an economic union very suspect in their eyes. Syrian Ambassador Waleed Mu'allim expressed this point when he said that the reason Syria rejected bilateral economic ties with Israel was a fear of Israeli economic hegemony. (16)

Peres believed that an agreement with Asad would open the door to normalization with the rest of the Arab world. But, it was highly doubtful that states such as Sudan, Libya, and Iraq would follow the Syrian example and make peace with Israel. Second, very few, if any, Arab leaders shared Asad's perception of Syria as the standard-bearer of Pan-Arabism. In fact, Asad was very bitter over the separate deals that the rest of Israel's neighbors had struck with Israel. In his eyes, they were a betrayal of Arab solidarity. Finally, there was little chance that the Clinton administration, faced with a Republican majority in Congress, would contemplate major economic

investment in Syria and/or in the Middle East.

The Wye Plantation talks between the Syrians and the Peres government (December 1994 to January 1995) turned out to be an exercise in futility. Ambassadors Dennis Ross and Itamar Rabinovitch tried to put the best face on those negotiations, but just as the meetings between military leaders on both sides had uncovered wide gaps in their positions, (17) an attempt to emphasize joint economic projects rather than security arrangements as a means of paving the road to peace fell flat, primarily due to Syrian objections. (18)

#### MATTERS UNRESOLVED

In the context of Syria's position on security arrangements, Rabinovitch made an observation that touches on President Asad's basic outlook. Asad's concept of peace, according to the Israeli ambassador, was consciously different from those of Sadat, Jordan's King Hussein, and Yasir Arafat. In Asad's eyes, "Israel remained a rival, if not an enemy, and the terms of the peace settlement should not serve to enhance its advantage over the Arabs, Syria in particular, but rather to diminish it." (19)

We had reached a similar conclusion toward the end of the Shamir government's negotiations. Treating the problem with Syria as primarily military, as Rabin did, or as a problem that could be solved by economic means, as Peres did, missed the point. The only accommodation Asad could accept was one that would drastically reduce Israel's capacity to defend itself from an attack by its Arab neighbors. I concluded that conceding the Golan Heights to Syria would not change Asad's perception of Israel's aggressor role in the region. It

definitely would not ensure the kind of peace Israel sought to achieve with Syria.

Contrary to historical fact, Asad and his representatives postulated that Israel was the aggressor in 1948 and 1967. According to this line of thought, Israel should not be rewarded for withdrawing from the Golan Heights. Since the state of war was caused by Israel's ostensibly unprovoked attack on Syria in 1967, peace would come about once Israel withdrew to the June 4, 1967 lines. Israel could not claim, and Syria could not entertain, any Israeli demand beyond the end of the state of war.

Rabinovitch did not lend due weight to Asad's peculiar, yet typical, quest for what Rabinovitch defined as "an agreement [that] had to be different from everybody else's." (20) This ambition was probably one of the most important factors in the repeated breakdown of the negotiations between Syria and Israel.

Asad needed to demonstrate that he was faithful to Arab (and Muslim) tradition and dignity in dealing with a non-Arab adversary. He also needed to show that a proud Arab, who stuck to Arab ideals and solidarity, could extract a better deal than those who had broken Arab ranks and had left Syria behind. Since Israel and the United States had been very generous in the agreements with Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinians, Asad was hard put to prove that his dogged tenacity would be rewarded by even bigger concessions. Contrary to Shamir's approach, Rabin and Peres had indicated early on their readiness to withdraw from the Golan Heights. Ehud Barak followed in their footsteps. Asad responded by demanding a prior commitment to withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 lines, right up to the last inch. Concurrently, Asad focused his efforts on

reducing the Syrian share in the settlement—peace and normalization—to the absolute minimum. This, in turn, raised Israeli doubts regarding Asad's inclination to make peace. As time dragged on, confidence and credibility, which were never very high, eroded further, creating growing obstacles on the road to agreement.

#### STALEMATE

Why have the recent talks failed once again, in spite of Barak's readiness to compromise? It is difficult to accept the version that Asad was willing to risk the immense concessions Israel had made because of his insistence on gaining a foothold on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. I tend to believe that the reason lies in one, or both, of two issues that are much more critical in Asad's eyes than the border issue.

The first reason is difficult to evaluate. It lies in the Syrian president's health and the problem of succession. Stability of the 'Alawite-controlled regime in Syria is of the uppermost importance to Asad. With his health slowly failing, Asad has been anxious to do the utmost to ensure as smooth a succession to his son Bashar. A settlement with Israel is bound to cause a tremor that could impinge on the stability of the regime at a critical moment in the succession. An Israeli flag flying on an embassy in Damascus could arouse dormant Sunni opposition to 'Alawite hegemony and prod the Muslim Brotherhood to remobilize and challenge the authority of the government. Facing such a risk, even if it is considered minimal, Asad has preferred to postpone a deal with Israel in favor of paving a solid, stable road to the succession.

The other possibility lies in Lebanon. I have always believed that, in Asad's scale of priorities, ensuring the

permanence of Syria's hold in Lebanon is far more important than regaining sovereignty over the Israeli-held portion of the Golan Heights. Israel's presence on the Heights--while a stain on Syria's pride and dignity--is far less of a disadvantage than the loss of Lebanon. Asad has invested a quarter-century of persistent effort and paid high costs to gain control over that country. He must first manage the dangerous situation following Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon and smother any demand by the Lebanese for a similar Syrian withdrawal. Only after this chapter of Syria's adventure in Lebanon is over and the Syrian permanent hold secures de-facto international acceptance can Asad, or his successor, renew efforts to regain the Golan Heights. Risking the displeasure of the American president and causing another disappointment to Barak is a small price to pay for this objective.

- 8) Rabinovitch, p. 219.
- 9) Rabinovitch, p. 104.
- 10) Rabinovitch, p.113.
- 11) Rabinovitch, p.106.
- 12) Rabinovitch, p.117.
- 13) Rabinovitch, p.154.
- 14) Rabinovitch, p.101.
- 15) Rabinovitch, pp.121, 125-129.
- 16) Rabinovitch, p. 213.
- 17) Rabinovitch pp. 171-185.
- 18) Rabinovitch, pp. 208-228.
- 19) Rabinovitch, p. 168.
- 20) Rabinovitch, p.204.

*\*Yossi Ben-Aharon headed Israel's negotiations with Syria from November 1991 to May 1992.*

#### NOTES

- 1) Itamar Rabinovitch, "The Brink of Peace; The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations," (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 94.
- 2) Rabinovitch, p.156.
- 3) Rabinovitch, p.142.
- 4) Ilham Abu-Salih, "Qiraati," Second Section for First Grade, Damascus, p. 56.
- 5) Ahmad Al-Qadiri, Anwar Kareemi, Saleem Al-Za'eem, "Uktub wa-Uhsub," First Section, Damascus, p. 33, exercise no. 5.
- 6) Rabinovitch, p.14.
- 7) Rabinovitch, p. 96.