

SYRIA AND THE PEACE: A GOOD CHANCE MISSED

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July 7, 1997

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FOREWORD

One of the more dismaying aspects of the current peace process has been the failure of Syria and Israel to make a deal. According to *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent Helena Cobban, these two long-standing foes came very close to composing their decades-old quarrel. The Syrian and Israeli leaders persevered to overcome extraordinary obstacles, but in the end failed. A terrible setback, says Cobban, because so much hard negotiating work had been done up to the very last moment when the whole carefully constructed edifice of peace drifted away.

This is one of a series of papers presented at a conference on the peace process sponsored by the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) in cooperation with Villanova University, which was held at Villanova in December 1996. The conference was arranged by Dr. Ann Lesch of Villanova, this study was edited by Dr. Stephen Pelletiere of SSI. We offer this report as a contribution to the informed debate on important issues within the overall peace process.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

HELENA COBBAN is a writer and columnist who contributes regular columns on global issues to the *Christian Science Monitor*. Ms. Cobban received a B.A. (Hons.) from Oxford University in 1973 and her M.A. in 1981. From 1974 through 1981, she worked as a journalist in the Middle East, including 5 years as a Beirut-based regional correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Sunday Times* (London). Since 1982 she has been based in Washington, DC. Her articles on Middle Eastern and other global topics have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, the *Economist* (London), and elsewhere. She has appeared on Good Morning America, the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, CNN, and NPR. Ms. Cobban has published three books: *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation: People, Power and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), *The Making of Modern Lebanon* (Hutchinsons and Westview, 1985), and *The Superpowers and the Syrian-Israeli Conflict* (Praeger, 1991).

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Introduction.

In late October 1991, Syrian and Israeli leaders sat down at the Middle East peace conference in Madrid and committed themselves to holding face-to-face talks to conclude a final resolution of the 43-year conflict between them. The promised bilateral negotiation opened that December: It was the first negotiation to be conducted directly between representatives of the two states.¹

In the 50 months of discussions that ensued, the Israelis and Syrians surmounted some quite extraordinary difficulties. They were able to overcome (indeed, they drew vital strength from) a change of government in Israel in June 1992. They survived the November 1995 assassination of Israeli Premier Yitzhak Rabin, numerous setbacks in the overall climate of Israeli-Arab peace-making,² and several changes in the format of the talks themselves. In addition, while much of value was accomplished in the face-to-face negotiations in Washington, a parallel high-level track was kept constantly in operation, undertaken by Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who made over a dozen visits to the Middle East during the first Clinton administration, and also through summit meetings and frequent letters and phone calls to the two leaders from the White House. According to several authoritative accounts, among the contentious issues that the negotiators were able to resolve were the depth of the projected Israeli withdrawal from the Golan and the nature of the envisaged peace. The talks also resulted in agreement on the text of the all important "Aims and Principles" document (full title "the Aims and Principles of the Security Arrangement"). After Shimon Peres' favored negotiator, Uri Savir, had completed his first round in the negotiations with Syria in early 1996, officials from Israel, the United States, and Syria all expressed confidence that 1996

would see agreement on the final text of the Israel-Syria agreement.

But in early March 1996, after the Israeli population suffered 79 losses from bombs set off by Palestinian extremists, the Peres government suspended its participation in the talks with Syria. Immediately thereafter, the Israeli-Syrian relationship plunged into a rapid downward spiral of mutual recriminations and hostility which neither Israel, nor Syria--nor the United States--appeared to do anything to brake. The rhetoric of the Middle Easterners shifted quickly from expressions of optimism regarding the peace talks to increasingly gloomy prognostications. With dread inevitability, this descent into political and rhetorical confrontation between the two states became transformed (as had occurred so often in the past) into an actual confrontation in Lebanon. On the night of April 10-11, 1996, the Peres government launched a much-expanded version of an earlier (July 1993) bombing campaign against its neighbor, which this time included intensive attacks from air, ground, and sea on facilities throughout the south of the country and up to, and including, Beirut.

Also unlike 1993, the Syrian leadership seemed in no hurry to use its influence to rein in Hizballah. And when the continuing, massive Israeli bombardment of Lebanon targetted large numbers of civilians--as any bombardment so massive, conducted in an area so heavily populated, almost inevitably must do--it rapidly became clear that with this campaign Peres had over-reached himself.

The ultimate outcome of Peres' deadly adventure in Lebanon was, from the point of view of many Israelis, very disappointing. It took the Israeli leader and Secretary of State Christopher until April 26 to persuade the Syrians and Lebanese to conclude a new cease-fire. They were able to achieve only a new (though now written) version of the *status quo ante* in Lebanon: under this agreement, the Lebanese resistance

fighters retain their right to strike at Israeli military targets inside Lebanon; any disputes concerning this confrontation will henceforth be judged by a committee that will include Syria and France along with Israel, Lebanon, and the United States. Meanwhile if (as was widely supposed throughout Israel) Peres had also sought electoral advantage through the bombing of Lebanon, his results on this score were disappointing: Shimon Peres and Labor lost the elections of May 1996.

The Likud Bloc (under whose auspices the negotiations with Syria had been totally stalemated prior to June 1992) returned to power, this time under the youthful but no more flexible leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu. The Syrian regime of President Hafez al-Asad, which just months earlier may have felt itself tantalizingly close to final conclusion of its negotiation with Israel, now faced a 180-degree turnabout in the position of its former negotiating partner. Starting from a position where he reiterated campaign promises to undertake no withdrawal at all from the Golan, Netanyahu shifted only far enough to say that he would negotiate "without preconditions" on the Golan. When pressed to spell out what this meant, he declared that he would not be bound by any of the verbal commitments undertaken by his predecessors. Meanwhile, he and his ministers announced new plans to house additional Jewish-Israeli settlers in the occupied Golan Heights.³

The experience of the years 1991-96 provides considerable new material for those interested in the ill-starred interactions between Israel and Syria, and between Israel and Lebanon. How can we explain the fact that the initially so-successful Israeli-Syrian negotiation resulted, in the end, in failure? What can we learn about what a "concludable" Syrian-Israeli peace agreement may eventually look like? Can the incremental-style of negotiation pursued throughout these talks be efficacious in later negotiations--assuming meaningful talks are ever resumed? What can we learn about the effectiveness of the styles of

intervention adopted by the two U.S. administrations involved? Can we learn anything significant about the possibility of disaggregating the Israeli-Lebanese negotiation from that between Israel and Syria?

But first, the main developments within the 50-month negotiation will be recapitulated.

Phase I: Getting through Shamir's inflexibility, and the negotiating achievements of Rabin's first three years (August 1992 -July 1995).

The first Israeli team to enter the bilateral talks with Syria in December 1991 was headed by Yossi Ben Aharon, the gruffly ideological head of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's personal office. The Syrian team was headed by Walid al-Muallim, his country's Ambassador to the United States. By all accounts, these negotiations made no appreciable headway: It was reported that both sides merely stated and re-stated their well-known public positions regarding the terms of a settlement and made no attempt to engage in any serious exploration of other options or compromises.

It was only after Shamir's Likud Party lost the elections of June 1992 to a Labor-led coalition headed by Yitzhak Rabin that the two sides started engaging in earnest. As leader of his negotiating team with Syria, Rabin chose the experienced academic specialist on Syria and other Arab countries, Itamar Rabinovich, whom he also named as his Ambassador to Washington.

When Rabinovich entered his first round of negotiation, he was met with an encouraging sign from his Syrian counterpart: Muallim presented a Syrian document outlining the items that would need to be discussed, as well the principles which Syria would bring to bear on these matters. Rabinovich agreed to adopt the Syrian document as a working paper for the negotiations.

In November 1992, President George Bush, who along with his Secretary of State James Baker had devoted considerable effort to launching and sustaining the Madrid-based peace process, was defeated in the national elections by Democratic challenger William Clinton. American engagement on all of the ongoing tracks of the peace talks diminished considerably between September 1992 and January 1993; first, because Baker and his principal aide for Middle East affairs, Dennis Ross, decamped from the State Department to the White House to help Bush run his failing campaign, and second, during the normal lame duck/inauguration period the old administration exited and the new one found its feet.

Then in December 1992 Prime Minister Rabin took the summary step of expelling 400 alleged Hamas activists from the occupied territories. This action aroused memories for many Palestinians and other Arabs of numerous previous expulsions at the hands of Israel; as a result, it soured the atmosphere for all Arab participants in the peace talks. Rabin tried to shove the expellees over the Lebanese border and into territory controlled by the Lebanese government, but he failed, as the Lebanese government was able to block this attempt. The expellees became stranded in a no-man's land in South Lebanon, where they served as a rallying point for those Arabs and Muslims who wanted to continue protesting against claimed Israeli iniquities.

The Syrian government did not visibly use any of its influence in Lebanon to try to find a rapid resolution to this issue. In addition, along with all the other negotiating teams, it suspended its participation in the talks in protest at the Israeli action and did not return to them until May 1993. By August 1993, however, informed Syrian sources report that their team had succeeded in winning from the Israelis a general agreement to the principle that Israel would, in return for a full peace agreement with Syria, undertake a withdrawal from occupied Syrian

territory that would be a "full" withdrawal--though there remained disagreement about exactly which line this would take them to. (The two major lines referred to in this connection are the old international border drawn up in 1923 between French-ruled Syria and British-ruled Palestine, and the line existing on June 4, 1967, immediately prior to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, which lies a few square kilometers west of the old international border, and would bring Syria close to the Sea of Galilee.)

The ability of the two parties to reach some kind of positive outcome in the negotiations in this period was all the more remarkable because June and July had seen a gradual escalation of the conflict in south Lebanon, where local militias backed by Syria and Iran had been attempting since Israel's partial pullback from Lebanon in 1985 to oust the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) from a 10-mile-wide band of Lebanese territory along Israel's northern border.⁴ On July 25, 1993, the Rabin government launched a punishing air and artillery bombardment against Lebanon: over the next 6 days, Israeli forces launched 22,000 artillery shells and 1,000 air-to-ground rockets against Lebanon, resulting in widespread terror and destruction, and the deaths of 1 Lebanese soldier, 8 fighters from the Hizballah militia, and 118 Lebanese civilians. In that same period, Hizballah launched 151 Katyusha rockets against northern Israel, killing two Israeli civilians.⁵

In response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the bombing, Secretary of State Christopher launched an urgent round of phone diplomacy. On July 31, he was able to secure the agreement of all the parties concerned--who included the governments of Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran, as well as the leadership of Hizballah--to a series of unwritten "rules of engagement" which would, it was hoped, prevent further civilian casualties. This feat of diplomacy was impressive, since the United States had relations with neither the Iranian government nor Hizballah. However, Syria played an important role through the close

working relationships it enjoyed with both these parties, its political influence over the Lebanese government and Hizballah, and its role as a conduit for Iranian aid to Hizballah. One Israeli official was quoted at the time as saying, "I think Christopher had to make only one call--to Damascus."⁶

After conclusion of the agreement over South Lebanon, the larger-scale negotiation between Israel and Syria over their own bilateral issues of peacemaking resumed on its generally productive course.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1993, however, Israeli government emissaries had also been carrying out intense but clandestine negotiations in Norway with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). At the beginning of September 1993, the resulting agreement was finally unveiled, and on September 13, the two sides signed their historic "Oslo" accords, under American auspices, on the White House lawn.

This development almost certainly came as a shock to President Asad, who, despite (or because of) his deep animosity towards PLO leader Yasser Arafat, had long advocated close coordination among all Arab parties to the peace talks with Israel to be carried on under his auspices. Nevertheless, Asad was restrained in his public response to announcement of the Oslo agreement. Syrian spokesmen said they were "neither opposed to nor supportive of" the Oslo accords, and that it was clearly up to the PLO leadership to bear responsibility for them. Ambassador Muallim even put in an appearance at the accords' White House signing ceremony.

Syrian sources recall that after that ceremony their negotiators were informed by the Americans that the Israeli leadership had said it could not expect the Israeli public to "digest" both an agreement with the PLO and an agreement with Syria at the same time. Israel and the United States thus asked the Syrians to go slow on continuing their negotiation, and the

Syrians reportedly agreed to this.

In January 1994, the Syrian-Israeli talks resumed in response to a request made by President Clinton during a summit meeting held with President Asad in Geneva that month--the first Asad had had with a sitting American President since his meeting with President Carter in Geneva in 1977. During the post-summit news conference, Asad said,

. . . we want the peace of the brave, a real peace that thrives, continues, guarantees the interests of all, and gives rights to their owners. If the leaders of Israel have enough courage to respond to such a peace, a new era of security and stability and normal peaceful relations among all will emerge in the region.

He also said, "We are ready to sign peace now."⁷

This latter statement seems, in retrospect, to have involved some hyperbole; at the time, though, it seemed clearly to be expressing the high degree of optimism with which Asad regarded the outcome of the peace talks. Within less than 24 hours, however, such optimism seemed out of place, as Rabin's deputy, Defense Minister Mordechai Gur, announced that, "in the event the territorial price demanded from us on the Golan Heights is significant, the government will put the issue to a referendum."⁸ And over the weeks that followed, President Asad's world changed further: on January 21, his eldest son, Basil, who had clearly been groomed for a leadership position for a number of years, was killed in car accident in Syria; and on February 25, Israel-Arab tensions rose again after Jewish-Israeli extremist Baruch Goldstein killed 29 Palestinians in Hebron's Ibrahimi Mosque.

Despite these setbacks, the momentum provided by President Clinton's direct involvement was such that the talks continued. Informed Syrian sources have

reported that in July 1994 they received "agreement" from the Israeli negotiators that the Israeli withdrawal would be to the line of June 4, 1967.⁹ (It should be noted that even on the Syrian side, some doubt over this seemed to remain. In June 1995, a commentator in the official Syrian daily, *Al-Thawra*, wrote that, "the Israeli side has not yet committed itself to a total withdrawal from the Golan Heights and Lebanon, and equal and symmetrical security arrangements."¹⁰) For his part, Ambassador Rabinovich has described the Israeli position on a full withdrawal as having been that, "Rabin, quite artfully, 'dangled the carrot' without 'promise, commitment or agreement'."¹¹ Orli Azulay-Katz, an Israeli writer with seemingly excellent access to Shimon Peres, has written that,

Rabin agreed to a full withdrawal from the Golan after the Americans brought him an oral message from Syrian President al-Asad in which for the first time he expressed a readiness to accept all the security arrangements Rabin demanded, something he had refused to do before.¹²

Throughout this period, the Israelis were also making considerable progress in their negotiations with Jordan.¹³ On July 25, Israeli and Jordanian negotiators in Washington signed a declaration laying out the principles according to which their governments would conclude a full peace within the next 2 months. The peace treaty that resulted was signed in Jordan on October 26 by King Hussein and Prime Minister Rabin, with President Clinton and many other world leaders--but not President Asad--in attendance.

By July 1994 the Syrians had evidently made up their minds to proceed to a discussion of other issues involved in the negotiation. On September 4, 1994, Muallim presented Rabinovich with another Syrian document reportedly detailing his government's views on such topics as the stages in which the withdrawal would

be undertaken (of which there would be two), timing, the elements of peace, the type of normalization, the types of security agreements, and each side's obligations at each of the two envisioned stages. After presiding over the Jordan-Israel treaty signing in Jordan at the end of October, President Clinton made a short side-visit to Damascus--the first by any sitting American President since President Nixon. There, he reportedly informed President Asad of a suggestion from Prime Minister Rabin that it was now time for the military chiefs of their two countries to start discussing the details of a security arrangement.

Talks between the two Chiefs of Staff duly opened in Washington in late December. Almost immediately, the new formula ran into a snag. As Rabinovich was later to tell a press interviewer, "we failed to carefully prepare for the meeting, which was held almost spontaneously."¹⁴ The analysis given by some Syrian sources of what occurred was that the Israeli Chief of Staff, General Ehud Barak, was given only 4 days to prepare for the December meeting; and that, in addition, he brought to it some of his own agenda and ambitions for the move that he would shortly make into the political sphere in Israel.

These Syrian sources recalled that the two sides learned from this incident that they needed to negotiate a political framework for the security agreement before talks could return to the technical-military level. These negotiations began in March 1995. During May Prime Minister Rabin and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq Shara made separate visits to Washington; and on May 22, the two negotiating teams reached agreement on a document titled, "Aims and Principles of the Security Arrangement." This was deposited with the Americans, though its terms and even its existence as a text agreed to by both sides at the highest level (though still only "verbally") were still, by mutual agreement, kept secret.

It was on the basis of this document that Israel's

newly-appointed Chief of Staff, General Amnon Shahaq, and a small accompanying team traveled to Washington at the end of June to meet with General Shihabi. According to senior Syrian sources who were present at these negotiations, the two sides agreed to discuss the security arrangements in three categories.

The first of these was the security/demilitarization regime within what the "Aims and Principles" document had described as the "relevant areas." The Syrian sources explained that this latter was a term Premier Rabin himself had coined in order to refer to "the areas where battles had taken place" between the two sides. The sources reported that the two sides agreed at the June talks that there would be security arrangements on both sides of the ultimate border, and that these would include demilitarized zones and zones of reduced armament.

The second category that the Chiefs of Staff addressed was early warning systems, including--according to the Syrian sources--the use of satellites and airplanes, and the role of "international technical help" in this field. But these sources reported that the Israeli side insisted on retaining the manned ground early-warning system that they had maintained on Mount Hermon (Jebel al-Shaikh) ever since 1967. The Syrian sources described their side's reaction to this as being, "We refused this totally. We consider it against our sovereignty, and a type of spying on us after the peace. We are sure the Israelis can do it with satellites and planes."¹⁵ As for the position on this issue of the U.S. Government, the well-connected Israeli commentator Ze'ev Schiff would report shortly after their conclusion that,

The United States has asked Israel and Syria to examine the possibility of Israel's evacuating the early warning station on Mount Hermon, which is currently manned by the IDF. Instead, Israel would maintain sophisticated electronic early warning equipment in the

place without keeping any Israeli teams there. In such an eventuality, Israelis would receive the early warning pictures in distant stations within the Green Line, to where the information will be relayed from Mount Hermon via optic fibers . . .

This alternative will obviously be more palatable to Syria than the others. Israeli experts say that the new electronic equipment guarantees the reception of distant information. They add, however, that this information will be less incontestable than the information obtained at present . . . They emphasize that . . . the electronic equipment cannot serve as a satisfactory substitute for the human element, especially in the initial period of several years after a peace agreement is signed, during which the fear of the agreement's being violated will be high.¹⁶

The third category of security arrangements that the second Chiefs of Staff meeting was due to address was the role of international forces. Syrian sources explained that this discussion never started because of the deadlock over the ground early-warning stations. They noted, however, that there was a disagreement over the format of these forces, with the Syrian side preferring that peacekeepers be deployed under U.N. auspices, with the Israelis preferring an American or American-led force, as in Sinai.

But even while the two Chiefs of Staff were at their work in Washington, two internal IDF documents, which referred frequently and at length to the text of the "Aims and Principles" document, and which both reportedly bore the signature of the head of the IDF's Strategic Planning Branch, General Tzvi Stauber (who was accompanying General Shahaq in the talks in Washington), were being leaked to Likud Chairman Netanyahu and selected figures in the Israeli media. On

June 28, Netanyahu made an outraged reference to one of these negotiating papers in the Knesset and entered its five-page-long text into the Knesset record, from where Israel's usually vigilant censors were unable to prevent its broad re-publication in the media.¹⁷ The following day, a second document, which was titled "An Analysis of the Document of Understandings," was leaked to journalists including a well-connected reporter for *Ha'aretz*, Aluf Ben. *Ha'aretz* printed what it claimed was the text of this second document on June 30.¹⁸

The text published in *Ha'aretz* presented a fairly clear analysis of the "Aims and Principles" document agreed to the previous month (though in the process of translation and re-translation, the word "Aims" had become "Objectives"). "The document," Stauber reportedly wrote,

is made up of two parts: the objectives of the security arrangements, phrased in a manner serving Israel's interests; and the principles of the security arrangements, phrased in a way that favors the well known Syrian position and imposing restrictions on the first part.

The document is an acknowledged basis for the discussions, but it allows for different and even contradictory interpretations and harbors a potential for arguments and differences of opinion regarding the correct interpretation.¹⁹

This document includes, in what seem to be General Stauber's direct quotations from the original text of the "Aims and Principles," a listing of three aims (or "objectives") and three principles that had been agreed to in it. According to the Stauber/Ben text, the aims (objectives) were, in the order listed:

"to reduce, if not to almost totally
/eliminate/ the danger of a surprise attack,"

"preventing or limiting daily friction along the border," and

"to reduce the danger of a large scale offensive, invasion, or comprehensive war."²⁰

According to this text, the agreed principles were as follows:

1. "The legitimate need of each of the parties is that the security of one party or the guarantees thereof should not be achieved at the expense of the other." . . .

2. "[T]he security arrangements will be /equal, mutual, and reciprocal on both sides/ . . . [and] if in the course of the negotiations, it transpires that the implementation of equality, from the geographic dimension, proves impossible with regard to specific arrangements, then experts from both sides will discuss the problematic aspects of the specific arrangement and solve them--whether through /modification/ (including additions or subtractions) or through some other agreed upon and acceptable solution with a single variable." . . .

3. "Security arrangements must coincide with each party's sovereignty and territorial integrity;" "the arrangements will be confined to the relevant areas on both sides of the border."²¹

In addition, in its discussion of the first "objective," the text presents an additional, and very important, sentence that purports to have been taken from the "principles" part of the document: "The purpose of the security arrangements--to ensure equality in overall security in the context of peace between the two countries."²²

General Stauber's analysis of the "Aims and Principles" document, as reported in this text, is revealing. Commenting on the second of the "principles" as listed above, he reportedly wrote that:

The formulations are supposed to help support our positions; however, it is very likely that the Syrians will exploit them with regard to Damascus.

The principle of geographic inequality is central to our concept of the security arrangements and is crucial for us. Should we succeed in securing this principle, then equality in the scope of the order of battle in the security strips is not necessarily to our disadvantage, especially if we can prevent the inclusion of reserve troops in the calculations²³

Most controversial within the Israeli political elite, however, were the implications, as reportedly spelled out by General Stauber, of the third of the principles listed: "This is a problematic contention as far as Israel is concerned This seems to lead to a claim that the zero line is the border (whether the international border or the 4 June 1967 borders), according to which Israel will carry out a full withdrawal."²⁴

The other document, whose text Netanyahu had revealed in the Knesset on June 28, appeared to be the talking-points that General Stauber prepared for the Israeli team's presentation in the Washington talks. Building on and making reference to many of the concepts listed fairly systematically in the Stauber/Ben text, the Stauber/ Netanyahu text consists of 17 numbered talking-points that develop many ideas and proposals for implementation of the "Aims and Principles." *Inter alia*, the Stauber/Netanyahu text says:

2. Our concept of the components of the security arrangements is based on several tiers:

a. The objectives and principles of the security arrangement as formulated to date.

b. An analysis of the military possibilities of both sides, and the threats and military answers that each side can present . . .

c. The need to have the security arrangements contribute to a solid sense of security and to the conduct of normal life both in Syria and in Israel, and to help create relations of confidence between the two sides. . . .

5. . . . [O]ur aim is to create a reality where the two sides have equal security margins with a lesser outlay of military resources. . . .

7. Our goal in the security arrangements is to create a situation where preparations for war by any side would require clear and overt steps lasting a significant period of time, and would therefore give the other side time to detect them, mobilize its troops, and deploy defensively . . . Therefore, the security arrangements should include the following elements:

a. A demilitarized buffer zone between the two armies: the IDF will withdraw and cede an excellent defense line which provides it with adequate answers to meet Israel's defense needs. We do not think that such a withdrawal should be used to improve the positions of the Syrian Army. Therefore, our first principle is that any area vacated by us should be demilitarized and remain clear of

any military infrastructure and presence. To avert the fear of the sides about the creation of a vacuum and a possible violation of the demilitarization, we will have to discuss several measures, including a foreign presence. Other demilitarized areas may also be discussed, but only as a supplement to this principle.

b. The purpose of the foreign presence that will deploy in this area is to put yet another obstacle, basically a political one, before a decision is made to move military forces to the Golan Heights . . . It is very important that this force should include a conspicuous American element.

c. The role of the foreign presence will not be to fight . . . [I]t is imperative to set up thinned-out areas on both sides of the demilitarized zone. The principles on which these areas will be based are as follows: . . .

3) The thinned-out areas should enable the establishment of a defense alignment meeting the key interests of the two sides. We are aware of the importance our Syrian counterparts attach to the defense of Damascus. For us, it is important to ensure a good defense of our population centers and infrastructure in northern Israel, and to keep our ability to maintain the necessary routine security against terrorist threats

9. It is important to mention . . . the centrality of Mount Hermon. Due to the special topography of the Golan Heights, Mount Hermon provides unique and irreplaceable early warning. These sites, in which vast resources were invested, enable us

(sic) continuous coverage and provide an overall solution devoid of the limitations of other intelligence sources. Our position is that the IDF should continue to receive information which can only be obtained by a presence on Mount Hermon. (We will have to discuss the various possibilities to exercise this ability.)²⁵

The Stauber/Netanyahu text refers to a number of other topics, including the need to reduce the potential for friction in Lebanon, and the need to build trust and engage in "social conditioning for peace in both armies." In the latter context, the text stated that,

We are hereby inviting Syrian officers to join U.N. officers in the check-up patrols they conduct on the Golan Heights. I also think that agreement to cooperate in searching for MIA's will largely contribute to creating a positive climate in the negotiations.²⁶

Netanyahu's revelation of this first Stauber document on June 28 spurred a storm of outrage from many Israelis--including many Labor Members of the Knesset, and even some members of Rabin's cabinet. The second Stauber document was even more controversial, with its judgment that the text of the "Aims and Principles" document, "seems to lead to a claim that . . . Israel will carry out a full withdrawal."

Despite this storm of disapproval, General Shahak continued the talks in Washington with General Shihabi until June 29. While still in the American capital, Shahak told an interviewer for IDF Radio that, "I can say that we established a dialogue and exchanged views. But parties clarified their positions and it was very clearly understood--and this is also important--that there remains [a] very wide gap between both parties' positions . . . "²⁷

The interviewer asked the Chief of Staff if he could explain, "how one conducts a dialogue on security arrangements without withdrawal lines or without the borders that Israel will pull back to on the Golan Heights?" In his reply, Shahak seemed clearly to be distancing himself from expressing any judgment that an agreement on "full" withdrawal might already have been reached:

We refrained from going into detail this time and only discussed the principles and fundamental issues that--if and when we achieve agreement on the points you raised, as well as on other aspects, such as the timetable and the nature of normalization between the two countries--will have to be translated into details . . .²⁸

On the Syrian side, meanwhile, government officials, and commentators closely linked to them, evinced their own reactions to the furor erupting in Israel over the contents of these leaked documents. Apparently responding to Shahak's remarks as quoted above, a commentator in the nearly-official Damascus daily, *Al-Thawra*, wrote that,

If the declarations made do not give the impression of optimism and instead stress wide and basic disagreements and differences, that is because the Israeli party has not yet committed itself to a total withdrawal from the Golan and south Lebanon, and equal and symmetrical security arrangements . . .

If Israel thinks of returning to its shilly-shallying, that will mean the final destruction of any hopes of peace.²⁹

For his part, General Shahak made a report on the talks to the Israeli cabinet at its regular Sunday morning session on July 2. According to an article

published the next day by journalist Aluf Ben, Shahak during this meeting mentioned several hypotheses about the location of the withdrawal line, and Prime Minister Rabin told the ministers that, "The chiefs of staff [meeting] could not discuss a withdrawal line, but it has to do with the content of the security arrangements." Ben also wrote that Shahak had come away from the Washington talks with the impression that Shihabi was, "a very businesslike person well-versed in the material."³⁰

The Israeli Chief of Staff had a negotiating coup to report, too. He apparently told the cabinet that Shihabi had proposed that, "Israel demilitarize territory on both sides of the peace border between the two countries at a ratio of 10 to 6; namely, for each kilometer demilitarized by Syria, Israel would demilitarize 600 meters."³¹

Hours after the publication of Ben's report, Israeli television announced that the government there had turned down this Syrian proposal. However, Channel 1 political correspondent Gadi Sukenik judged that, "Israeli officials are pleased with Syria's very readiness to accept the principle of geographical disparity in the security arrangements." He noted that, "Israel is demanding that Syria demilitarize a far larger area than that demilitarized by Israel."³²

The next day, Aluf Ben gave further details of the Syrian offer on asymmetrical arrangements. He wrote that, according to Shahak, Shihabi had suggested that the 10:6 formula apply to the "thinned-out areas" as well as the totally demilitarized areas. According to Ben, Shihabi had presented this formula at the beginning of his talks with Shahak. Ben quoted unnamed political sources in Israel as saying that the 10:6 offer was "an opening stand, and the Syrians are also aware of the fact that they will have to compromise on a different ratio." Ben's sources told him that Shihabi's early enunciation of this offer, "was a pleasant surprise. It could have been worse." Shihabi's

offer, these sources said, "indicates that the Syrians have waived their old demand for full symmetry in security arrangements on both sides of the border." (Previously, according to Ben, Israel had demanded that the security arrangements be based on a 9:1 ratio, "which is proportionate to the difference in size between Israel and Syria.")³³

There is, of course, a large difference between 10:6 and 9:1 as principles for building down force levels. But Syria's insistence on absolute parity had been breached for the first time. Chief U.S. negotiator Dennis Ross was eager to visit Israel and Syria to see whether he could help make headway in narrowing the gap that remained, and Generals Shihabi and Shahak were due to return to Washington within 2 weeks in order to continue their face-to-face talks.

But this never happened: Why? What, one must ask, occurred in either or both of the capitals concerned to make the two leaders turn away from what seemed like the very brink of an agreement?

The greatest evidence about what happened is available from Israel. Specifically, the account of the negotiations included in the book published by reporter Orli Azulay-Katz in September 1996 claimed that, "at a certain stage Rabin decided to moderate the pace to achieve an arrangement with Syria. He thought that it would be wise to let Israelis first get used to the Oslo arrangements with the Palestinians and only then to start the arrangement with Syria--perhaps hold a meeting before the elections and sign a document of principles, but no more."³⁴ Given that Rabin knew he could call national elections in Israel at any time up to October 1996, this would give him a lot of time--as he may have thought--to get back to the Syrian track of his negotiations at a later date.

In addition, as July progressed, Rabin's government was once again becoming preoccupied with completing a new agreement on the Palestinian track. By

the end of September 1995, the Israeli-Palestinian talks had resulted in the conclusion of the "Oslo-2" agreement. And while the Israeli public was still getting used to the implementation of this agreement, the ultra-nationalist zealot Yigal Amir shot Yitzhak Rabin dead.

Phase II: Shimon Peres and beyond: November 1995-December 1996.

According to Ms. Azulay-Katz's account (which seems strongly informed by the interviews she conducted with Peres), it was not until after Rabin's assassination that his successor, Shimon Peres, learned the details of the negotiations that Rabin and Rabinovich had been conducting with the Syrians. Indeed, although Peres had been Rabin's Foreign Minister throughout all his time in office, there is some indication that he had not been kept abreast of the details of the negotiations. During the crisis of late June 1995, for example, Peres was asked by an interviewer for IDF Radio whether he had been aware of the existence of the Stauber/Ben document, which had been published in *Ha'aretz* that morning, and he explicitly stated that he had not, and confirmed that he was now hearing about it for the first time.³⁵

At the same time, Ms. Azulay-Katz's account does not delve into the nuances of how closely Rabin had "dangled the carrot" of a promise of a full withdrawal before the noses of his Syrian interlocutors. According to the newspaper's digest of her book, what Peres learned after Rabin's death was that Rabin had given the Americans an explicit verbal promise that, in return for Syrian compliance with a satisfactory security arrangement and with other political terms of a peace treaty, his government would pull back to "some line between the international border and the June 4 line . . . [I]t definitely referred to a full retreat from the entire Golan Heights." Ms. Azulay-Katz wrote that,

When President Clinton came to [Rabin's] funeral he turned to Peres and wanted to know whether the new government would uphold the commitment made by Rabin. Clinton made it clear to Peres that he viewed Rabin's commitment as valid even after the establishment of the Peres government.³⁶

Peres, according to this account, "was very agitated," and called in Israel's senior military leaders for confirmation of what had been agreed on the territorial and security issues. Then he decided to try to continue the talks. What is not clear from the newspaper digest of the Azulay-Katz account is precisely why Peres decided to continue the talks, since Rabin had apparently decided in the summer of 1995 to put them on hold. But it appears from Ms. Azulay-Katz's account that he was optimistic: "Peres was sure that he would be campaigning in the elections with a Syrian peace accord in his pocket. 'We will have peace with Syria within 6 months,' he said."³⁷

Senior Syrian sources have said that when Secretary of State Christopher arrived in Damascus on yet another shuttle-diplomacy mission later in November 1995, he told President Asad of Peres' desire to continue with the negotiations, based on a commitment to full withdrawal and the "Aims and Principles of the Security Arrangement." These sources said that Asad explicitly sought confirmation from Christopher on whether Peres wanted to push ahead and complete the negotiations before the elections in Israel, and that he informed the Secretary that he would be prepared to wait until after the Israeli elections to resume. The message that the Syrians got back from Peres was that he "preferred peace to elections," and that he would commit to concluding a peace agreement during 1996. After the Syrians also received a commitment from President Clinton that he, too, was committed to seeing the conclusion of a Syrian-Israeli peace in 1996, these sources said, President Asad added his commitment to

the same goal.³⁸

The new set of talks that opened in the last week of December 1995 marked the introduction of yet another new format. This time, the talks were returned to the political echelon. Ambassador Muallim was once again the head of the Syrian team, while the Israeli team was now headed by Uri Savir, a close political protege of Shimon Peres who had been his chief official shepherding the secret Oslo talks with the PLO to a successful conclusion. (Rabinovich stayed on the Israeli team, but was no longer its leader.) This time, too, the talks moved out of the dry corridors of the State Department into the more relaxed country-house setting of the Aspen Institute's "Wye Plantation" conference facility on Maryland's Eastern Shore: it was planned that the negotiators would go there for two back-to-back, 3-day-long sessions per month until the negotiations were concluded.

At the first Wye Plantation session, which bracketed the New Year, all the issues involved in the negotiations were reportedly aired, including normalization of political relations, water, and the timetable for implementation, as well as the territorial and security questions.

The second Wye Plantation session opened at the end of January 1996. This time, there was more emphasis on the security issues. But by the end of January, too, evidence was accumulating that Peres' belief that an agreement was possible within 6 months was over-optimistic, due to escalating criticism within his own cabinet. On January 26, for example, his Foreign Minister Ehud Barak--the previous Chief of Staff whose intervention in the December 1994 session had been so undistinguished--was openly expressing doubts about the prospects of the Wye Plantation talks. He told Israeli television viewers that, "I do not expect these talks to solve all the problems between us and Syria. Therefore, it does not stand to reason that the talks will end in an agreement."³⁹ On January 28, Israel's

Channel 2 television network was reporting that major clashes over the Wye Plantation talks had erupted in that morning's Sunday cabinet meeting, with some ministers and the head of the IDF intelligence branch's Research Division strongly criticizing Peres' optimism regarding them. The network's correspondent reported that,

ministers did not share Peres' optimism today. Their outlook was that there is no chance for an agreement with Syria before the elections. The usually cautious chief of staff, Lieutenant General Amnon Shahaq, told them: I do not see how the negotiations with the Syrians can be finished within six months . . . The time factor worries Shim'on Peres, too:

[Begin Peres recording] These are not mere negotiations with a neighbor; this is also a race against time. [end recording]⁴⁰

Three days later, Peres was telling Israeli television viewers that the just-concluded Wye session had been "very constructive." Nevertheless, talk in Israel about the possibility of early elections (as an alternative to seeking conclusion of the talks with Syria before the election deadline of the following October) continued apace. Peres told television viewers on January 31 that,

I assume that I will reach my decision this month, during February. Even if we hold early elections, the negotiations will continue before as well as after the balloting. And even if the elections are held as scheduled, there is no guarantee that we will conclude the negotiations before then. Therefore, absolutely no linkage should be made between the election process and the negotiations.⁴¹

By February 11, Peres had made his mind up, and

made a lengthy announcement of his decision to opt for elections in May. In this announcement, he said,

We decided that the negotiations with Syria must not be conducted under the pressure of elections. Christopher's successful visit to Damascus determined that the negotiations can continue to be conducted independent of the elections. Therefore, we reiterate that the agreement with Syria will be brought to a national referendum.⁴²

He also admitted that, "the negotiations with Syria will last longer than I thought."

While electioneering got boisterously underway in Israel, Mr. Savir and his team prepared to return to the United States for the third Wye Plantation session scheduled to start on February 28. (Savir would also be discussing with his American hosts the terms for a new strategic Memorandum of Understanding regarding American aid, especially in intelligence matters, that would supplement the signing of a future peace agreement with Syria.) One Israeli political source was quoted in *Ma'ariv* as saying that the goal during the Wye session, "is to get through the months left until the elections in relative peace and quiet, without harming the negotiations."⁴³

From the Syrian perspective, the first week of this session "was very productive." Senior Syrian sources reported that the two sides and the Americans present started to discuss "very deep details" of the security arrangements, including details of the regime in the "relevant areas." These sources added that shortly before the end of the first week of talks, Ambassador Mu'allim had a small meeting with Savir and U.S. Ambassador Dennis Ross, at which Savir urged continuous negotiations in order to finish the skeleton of an agreement as soon as possible, with the aim that in June the parties could start drafting the final text of the agreement. Mu'allim and Savir met again,

according to these sources, on Saturday, March 2, in order to prepare the agenda for the following week.

The next day, Palestinian suicide bombers struck in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, killing many Israeli civilians. Ross then informed Mu'allim that Savir had instructions to return immediately to Israel. On March 4, the IDF Radio received word that the Israeli government had decided to suspend the negotiations with Syria.⁴⁴ Two days later, the radio station reported that,

Rabinovich was again disappointed--although not surprised--yesterday when Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shar' refused to accede to Secretary of State Christopher's request that Syria operate against the terror organizations or at least denounce the attacks. Referring to the negotiations with Syria, Ambassador Rabinovich foresees a long period of freeze; however, he is not worried about this.

[Rabinovich] At this point, none of us are speaking about a precise date in the near future for the resumption of the talks. There have already been breaks in these negotiations that went on for months, and when they were resumed, it was usually possible to pick them up from the point where they left off rather than regress in the talks.⁴⁵

Later that day, Peres spelled out that, "This is one of the reasons we have now stopped the negotiations. There was no denunciation [of the terror bombs], and there is the totally unacceptable fact that in Damascus there are people who incite the Palestinians to pursue acts of terror."⁴⁶

For his part, President Asad kept to his customary practice of saying little in public. On March 8,

however, Abdallah al-Ahmar, a veteran boss in Asad's ruling Ba'th Party, told a party rally that the blame for the escalation of tensions lay with Israel's policy:

Had Israel responded to the foundations of the peace process and committed itself to providing its requirements, primarily withdrawal from the occupied territory, obstacles would not have emerged in the way of the peace process to an extent that threatens to bring about its collapse. In addition, the region would not have continued to suffer from tension and a cycle of violence . . . Israel has continued its occupation of Arab territory and denial of Arab rights. This is the source of tension that denies the region security, peace, and stability. Throughout this period, Israel continued to escalate its aggressive practices against Arab citizens in the occupied land. These practices reached the extent of collective punishments in all forms. This led to a state of frustration in the entire region.

. . . While reiterating its commitment to the peace process and to continuing the efforts to make it succeed, Syria repeats its clear and unambiguous stand--which it expressed through the negotiations and to the two sponsors of the peace process and the whole world--that it will not give up any inch of its territory [applause] and will not relinquish Arab rights.⁴⁷

This rhetorical exchange was just a foretaste of a propaganda war between the two capitals which escalated rapidly over the 5 weeks that followed. Israeli officials (including Prime Minister Peres) continued to blast away with accusations that Syria was "soft" on terrorism and harbored terrorists in areas under their

control in both Syria and Lebanon. For their part, officials in Syria (but not President Asad) launched bitter criticisms that the Israeli government was non-compliant and laggardly in the peace process, and that Israel sought to "encircle" Syria through its new military alliance with Turkey and relationship with Jordan, and through the international "anti-terrorism" summit that Israel rapidly helped Egypt and the United States to pull together in Sharm al-Shaikh, Egypt, in the middle of March.

Meanwhile, the situation in south Lebanon, which had only been partially stabilized in July 1993, remained a cause of continuing political embarrassment to Israel's Labor rulers. From January 1995 to mid-March 1996, 64 soldiers from the IDF and its allied proxy militia were killed as a result of Hizballah's increasingly effective operations in South Lebanon.⁴⁸ During March 1996 alone, seven IDF soldiers along with two of their proxy fighters were reported killed.⁴⁹ The losses that the IDF was taking there--along with the sense of threat in northern Israel, where Hizballah fired two salvoes of Katyushas on March 30 in retaliation for civilian losses on their side of the line--put great pressure on Peres in the midst of the election campaign. And this time, unlike in July 1993, Syria did nothing to rein in the Lebanese resistance fighters. Indeed, Israeli spokesmen claimed that Syria was actively helping to channel Iranian arms to Hizballah camps in Lebanon.

By April 10, with many residents of northern Israel now spending time in air-raid shelters and voicing considerable hostility to the Prime Minister, Peres decided to launch another large-scale bombing campaign against Lebanon.⁵⁰ This bombing started early on April 11.

This campaign, given the unabashedly appropriate name of "Operation Grapes of Wrath," had a wider scale even than the July 1993 bombing--though strong memories inside Israel of the debacle they ended up suffering in

Lebanon in the wake of the large-scale ground incursion of 1982 meant that this time, as in 1993, the campaign was restricted to the use of stand-off weapons.

Operation Grapes of Wrath targeted cities, towns, villages, and infrastructural facilities throughout southern Lebanon, as well as targets all along the main coastal route up to Beirut, and some targets in and around the Lebanese capital itself, including a power station. The radio station run by the Israeli proxy forces warned residents of 44 villages and towns in the south, as well as the city of Nabatiyeh, to leave their homes by 2:30 p.m. on April 12.⁵¹ Israeli Foreign Minister Ehud Barak told Israeli television on the evening of the 12th that,

We have seen televised reports of large numbers of people--possibly over 100,000--moving toward Beirut, and the Lebanese government is accountable for the price, which we regret, in the form of the Lebanese population's suffering and for any other suffering and damage that may be caused. The Lebanese government . . . will have either to disband Hizballah or to find another way to quell its activities.⁵²

But if Peres and his top advisers were hoping that the suffering they were inflicting on Lebanon would result on the Lebanese government crying "Uncle," then they made a terrible misjudgment. For as in many other cases of widespread terror bombing against civilians, the scale of the assault served only to consolidate a considerable proportion of the Lebanese population around Hizballah, an organization deeply rooted in the majority Shi-ite communities of South Lebanon. (Hizballah also enjoyed representation in Lebanon's parliament and government. Hence, the idea that it could easily be marginalized and then repudiated by the rest of the Lebanese political elite was quite ill-founded.) Moreover, by addressing themselves solely to Lebanon's ever-fragile internal government while

pointedly failing to involve the Syrians in their political efforts in those early days, Israel's leaders more or less ensured the non-cooperation of a Syrian regime which saw the campaign as yet another attempt by Israel to cut a separate deal with an Arab interlocutor and thus further to isolate Damascus.

A combination of internal Lebanese and Lebanese-Syrian factors thus ensured that no-one in the Lebanese government came forward to offer to "disband" Hizballah; and since, during the early days of Operation Grapes of Wrath, this was the sole and unnegotiable demand of the Peres government, the operation continued in its blind and murderous way day after day after day. And day after day, Peres' announced goal of ending Hizballah's sporadic attacks against northern Israel was proven unrealized, adding to the political pressure on him at home.

News of the destruction being caused in Lebanon created a furor among the Arabs, in Europe, and in much of the rest of the world. Many governments, including those of France, Russia, Egypt, and Jordan, offered to help mediate a resolution of the crisis. But Peres was sensitive to political signals from only one foreign capital, Washington, and from there he continued to receive *carte blanche* to act as he liked against Lebanon. By April 15--with the bombing continuing from air, sea, and ground platforms--he evidently concluded that the approaches earlier made to the Lebanese government were hopeless, and that now it was time to try to win Syria's support to resolve the crisis. Israeli television reported that evening that Israeli officials were starting to draw up possible drafts of an agreement under which Israel would demand a Syrian commitment to enforce any understandings reached with Hizballah. Peres' chief negotiator Uri Savir had reportedly told foreign ambassadors in Israel that day that the new political contacts--conducted through Washington--"may achieve results within hours or days."⁵³

One of the unintended consequences of Operation Grapes of Wrath was that Syria's relative isolation in the Arab world, which had been underlined by its refusal to attend the Sharm al-Shaikh summit, was dramatically reversed.⁵⁴ Sentiment on the part of the Arab political elite, which had earlier been prepared to allow Israel some sympathy for the losses suffered during the suicide bombings of February and March, now expressed outrage at the widespread destruction caused against Arab civilians at the orders of none other than Israel's "Mr. Peace" (Prime Minister Peres). On April 17, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq Shar'a traveled to Egypt to attend an emergency meeting called by the Arab League Council to discuss the crisis in Lebanon. Armed with this important new support in the Arab world, Asad's government seemed in no hurry to respond favorably to the new Israeli overture.

On April 18, Israeli gunners involved in the campaign fired five or six heavy anti-personnel rounds against the camp of a U.N. contingent near Qana, Lebanon, killing 107 Lebanese civilians who had sought shelter there. Israel first reported that the firing had been a technical mistake, though on-the-spot investigations by U.N. military observers cast doubt on that explanation.⁵⁵ International reaction to this mass killing--including, for the first time, some signs of official ill ease on this score from Washington--further increased the pressure on Peres to find a speedy resolution.

It took a further 8 days--days in which Israel kept up the pace and scale of its bombardments in Lebanon--before a new agreement could be concluded and Operation Grapes of Wrath was eventually halted. The new agreement was similar to the unwritten 1993 understanding under which "all parties" in south Lebanon undertook not to target civilians, with the following changes:

- the new agreement was written;

- Syria was formally included in the diplomacy leading up to the agreement, and among the signatories to it;

- allegations of violations of the not-targeting-civilians rule would be investigated by a 5-party committee composed of representatives from Lebanon, Israel, Syria, the United States, and France; and,

- the parties formally undertook not to use populated areas, industrial regions, or electric establishments as starting points for military attacks.⁵⁶

As was gleefully noted by official Syrian and pro-Hizballah media, the new agreement notably did **not** include any prohibition against Hizballah targeting IDF or proxy forces inside Lebanon. And Syrian television noted--at the joint press conference U.S. Secretary of State Christopher held with Prime Minister Peres to announce the new agreement --that the American called for an early resumption of the bilateral Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese negotiations.⁵⁷ Syrian TV commentator Yusuf Maqdisi commented that:

Anyone who works for peace does not commit crimes and operations of annihilation. . . . He does not always opt for war, trick the world into believing that implementing U.N. resolutions is futile, and create pretexts to abandon the peace process. Israel has been doing this since the Madrid conference 5 years ago.

"Syria," Maqdisi said, "supports the U.S. sponsor's efforts to resume the peace process on the principles from which it started, because . . . [t]here is no alternative except the continuation of tension, which drags the region into danger."⁵⁸

Within Israel, the agreement that Peres finally

ended up signing over Lebanon was attacked bitterly by Likud opponent Benjamin Netanyahu. "I would have acted differently," he vowed to a television interviewer, "I would have disbanded Hizballah's infrastructure in South Lebanon." Asked how he would have done this, Netanyahu replied, "In a military action."⁵⁹ Many members of the Israeli elite remembered, of course, the pains their country had suffered during and after the earlier, Likud-launched ground incursion into Lebanon in 1982. But Netanyahu's criticism of Peres probably played well among many residents of the northern Israeli "development towns"--while there were doubtless also some Jewish Israeli voters who were pleased to see Peres' use of force in Lebanon.

Opinion polls taken after the May 19 election indicated that, on balance, Operation Grapes of Wrath resulted in no appreciable change in the level of support Peres enjoyed from Israel's majority of Jewish voters. But among the 15-17 percent of voters who are Palestinian Israelis, the ferocity of Peres' campaign against fellow Arabs was a significant factor that dented their willingness to turn out at the polls in support of the man previously dubbed by many Arabs as "Mr. Peace." It was by a slim margin of fewer than 30,000 votes that, in Israel's first-ever direct election to the Premiership, Mr. Peres lost out to Mr. Netanyahu.⁶⁰

Netanyahu's election caused a flurry of high-level diplomatic activity within the Arab world. In the days that followed, President Asad and Foreign Minister Shara played a large role, along with the Egyptians, in the contacts that led to the convening of an Arab summit in late June. What startled many Arab leaders was the harsh tone with which, even after his election, Netanyahu continued to criticize the very foundations on which the Madrid process had been built over the past half-decade. In draft government guidelines drawn up on June 7, Netanyahu reportedly wrote that,

The Golan Heights is an area essential to the

existence of Israel. The Golan is an important Zionist settlement region of the state, that is essential for its security and for the preservation of its water resources. The government will insist on Israel's sovereignty over the Golan in any peace arrangement, and will bolster settlement enterprises on the Golan.

Three days later, these terms were reportedly "softened" to the following: "The government considers the Golan Heights a vital area for the security of the state and for the preservation of its water resources and should insist on preserving it under Israeli sovereignty." In addition, the new guidelines reportedly stated that, "The Israeli Government will hold negotiations with Syria without any preconditions."⁶¹

Talk of "negotiations without preconditions," or--another old Likud favorite trotted out by Netanyahu--"peace for peace" (instead of "land for peace"), was extremely disappointing to the Syrian leaders. So was another Likud trial balloon that Netanyahu and his foreign policy "advisor," Dore Gold, tried out as well: "Lebanon first." For their part, the Syrians continued in the latter half of 1996 to insist that any return to the peace table be based on the original principles of the Madrid peace conference, and on the agreements that had been negotiated already with the Government of Israel in the years since then. By the end of 1996, the relationship among Israel, Syria, and Lebanon looked very similar to what had existed under the previous Likud government, with the Israelis once again announcing the construction of new settlement housing units in the occupied Golan, and a continuation of low-intensity conflict in south Lebanon. The only things that had changed were the creaky activation of the Monitoring Group for South Lebanon, which sporadically brought Israeli and Syrian representatives face-to-face with the representatives of the three other governments concerned,⁶² and the existence of dusty files full of

agreements tentatively concluded by Rabin but never pulled together into a consummated whole.

Conclusions.

This survey of the 5 years of Syrian-Israeli interaction that followed the late-1991 convening of the Madrid peace conference indicates clearly that by the end of 1996, the Israeli-Palestinian track was by no means the only portion of the negotiations that was in serious trouble. The Syrian-Israeli negotiation had likewise, during 1996, spun completely off a course which, up to mid-1995--and even as late as February 1996--appeared to its participants to be on its way to a successful conclusion.

For those concerned with the long-term stability of the Middle East, the successive downturns that occurred in the Syrian-Israeli relationship during late 1995 and 1996 were particularly frustrating both because of the importance of this element of the peace process, and because the hard negotiating work done between August 1992 and June 1995 had brought the two parties so tantalizingly close to reaching the outlines of a final-status peace agreement. This agreement had been based fair and square on the principles for peacemaking supported by the international community--but notably **not** by Israel's Likud party--since 1967: that is, on the principles of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force and the consequent need for an exchange of land for peace between the parties.

What lessons does the experience of 1991-96 have for planners trying to strategize for future rounds of a Syrian-Israeli negotiation? A first and important lesson is that President Asad's regime showed in this period, as in earlier years, that it was not willing to settle for anything less than the complete return of all Syrian lands occupied by Israel in 1967, and similarly, that it had no interest at all in concluding

a second interim agreement, to be added to the disengagement-of-forces agreement concluded with Israel in 1974. In both these respects, Asad's negotiating stance differed considerably from that of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Evidently, President Asad considered his position *vis-à-vis* Israel to be considerably stronger than Arafat's. And by the end of 1996, nothing had occurred that disproved this judgment.

As an important corollary to the above, it should be noted, however, that once assured by the Israeli leaders that they would consider a full withdrawal from Syrian lands, Asad then declared that he would consider acceding to a broad range of Israeli counter-demands, in both the political and the important security spheres. By June 1995, it seemed that the outline of a do-able deal had been found by the negotiators: a total Israel withdrawal in return for full political relations and a security regime which would be to some degree, yet to be determined, asymmetrical in Israel's favor. In other words, a deal that would look like the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in many important respects.

A student of history may ask why it took the parties this long--28 years after the passage of Security Council resolution 242 in 1967--to reach this point. The laggard-liness of the parties prior to 1991 need not concern us here. But what did seem to emerge only in 1991 was the readiness in that year of the Syrian leadership and of a broad consensus within the Israeli political leadership to at least explore whether a 242-based deal was possible--as well as, equally importantly, a new commitment from the ruling forces in the international community (that is, by that point, the U.S. leadership) to nail down this crucial plank of the Israeli-Arab confrontation into a formal peace agreement.

Over the years that followed 1991, some of these factors changed. The Israeli leadership's readiness to

engage in the tough diplomacy needed for a deal with Damascus increased with the 1992 election of Labor, but was dented when Premier Rabin's calculations shifted towards focussing on the Palestinians. When he put the Syrian negotiations on a back burner in June/July 1995, he may have thought he could revive them later on, before his next election campaign. But history proved that hope false. Shimon Peres' stewardship of the Syrian question during his ill-fated premiership then proved sloppy and disastrous, and his act of withdrawing from the talks paved the way both for a serious deterioration in the security situation in the region and for his (Likud) successor's abstention from any participation in the bilateral talks. And one of the biggest mistakes of both Rabin and Peres was their failure to try to actively and publicly re-frame the whole issue of Israel's security *vis-à-vis* its neighbors as being a question of security interdependence rather than zero-sum-gaming and constant threat.

The ever-crucial factor of American commitment to the talks' successful conclusion also changed during the period under study. True, Secretary Christopher made 20 or more shuttle trips between Syria and Israel during his tenure, and President Clinton relatively frequently became personally engaged in jolly along this track. But there was an aimlessness to all this engagement, and a willingness not to move one step beyond what the Israeli leadership itself wanted, that contrasted strongly with the engagement that President Bush had shown. The Clinton administration's engagement also contrasted strongly with, for example, the engagement of President Carter in the diplomacy of the Camp David Accords, or that of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in even earlier rounds of Israeli-Arab diplomacy. In President Carter's case, he showed that once he had committed himself personally to the negotiation, he would stick with it, and with America's commitments to the deal's signatories, as a full and guiding participant until it was successfully concluded--or there would be a price for the dissenting

party to pay. Secretary Kissinger's diplomacy, similarly, was very different from the role of tentative message-carrier that Secretary Christopher and even President Clinton seemed to see for themselves.

The Syrian leadership's commitment to concluding a deal--provided it was based on a full Israeli withdrawal--did not seem to vary as much during the period under question as did that of the Israelis or Americans. Was there more that President Asad could have done to bring earlier success to the negotiations? Undoubtedly there was. He could have revealed more of his negotiating hand to the Israelis earlier. He could have taken action to brake or end the activities of groups committed to violence inside Israel, or against Israeli targets within Lebanon. But all these actions would, in Asad's ever-cautious view, have involved some political costs; and these he considered not worth paying in the absence of any clearly visible dividend from Israel or the United States.

If there is to be an Israeli-Syrian agreement, this will have consequences for the good throughout the Middle East. But with the return to power of Likud in 1996, and the re-election of President Clinton five months later, such an agreement seems considerably more distant than it appeared in 1991.

ENDNOTES

1. The 1974 agreement under which the two states agreed to disengage their forces on the Golan was signed by military representatives of the two states at the same ceremony. But it had been negotiated entirely through the shuttle diplomacy of U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

2. These included Israel's attempted expulsion of 400 alleged Hamas activists in December 1992 (which led to a short Syrian suspension of participation in the bilaterals); its July 1993 bombing campaign in Lebanon

which killed some 120 Lebanese civilians along with a small number of military personnel; and the killing of 29 Palestinian civilians in the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron by a Jewish-Israeli extremist (February 1994).

3. In October 1996, the Israeli National Oil Company even announced plans to drill for oil in the Golan. These plans were reported as canceled two days later, on account of new plans to privatize the oil company.

4. Israel first established an IDF presence in that zone when it launched a large-scale ground incursion into Lebanon in March 1978. U.N. Security Council resolution 425, passed in June 1978, called on Israel to make an unconditional withdrawal from Lebanon. In this sense, it was distinct from resolutions 242 and 338, which called for the Arab parties concerned to conclude a formal peace agreement with Israel in return for withdrawal. But Lebanon did not take part in the wars of 1967 or 1973, and was not a party to 242 or 338. Regardless of the distinction between these resolutions, by late 1996 Israel still had not complied with 425, and did not appear to be about to.

5. These figures are quoted in Human Rights Watch, *Civilian Pawns: Laws of War Violations and the Use of Weapons on the Israel-Lebanon Border*, New York and London: Human Rights Watch, 1996, p. 68. Pages 68-116 give a detailed account of this campaign, as well as of the fighting that continued between these parties in South Lebanon between July 1993 and April 1996.

6. David Hoffman, "Israel Halts Bombardment of Lebanon," *Washington Post*, August 1, 1993, as quoted in *Civilian Pawns*, p. 38n.

7. "Leaders hold news conference," Damascus: Syrian Arab Television Network in Arabic, 1513 GMT, January 16, 1994; as translated in *FBIS-NES-94-011*, January 18, 1994, pp. 55, 56.

8. "Gur: Referendum if peace price significant," Tel Aviv: IDF Radio in Hebrew, 1400 GMT, January 17, 1994; translated in *FBIS-NES-94-011*, January 18, 1994, p. 39.

9. Interview with senior Syrian participant, November 1996.

10. See "Israel Blamed for Lack of Progress," Agence France-Presse in English, June 30, 1995, as reproduced in *FBIS-NES-95-128*, July 5, 1995, p. 9.

11. Letter from Ambassador Rabinovich, November 11, 1996.

12. "Book Claims Rabin Promised al-Asad Full Golan Withdrawal," *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, September 11, 1996, pp. 1, 19; in *FBIS-NES-96-178*.

13. This negotiation presented few of the difficulties of disentanglement involved in Israel's bilaterals with either Syria or the Palestinians. Since 1988, when the Jordanian king disavowed any responsibility for the outcome in the West Bank, Jordan retained only a tiny territorial claim against Israel; and for many years had presented no military threat to Israel. Still, the relative speed with which Jordan concluded its negotiation came as yet another blow to any hopes Asad may have had for coordination of the Arab parties' diplomatic efforts.

14. "Rabinovich on Shahaq-al-Shihabi Meeting," Tel Aviv: *Davar*, June 30, 1995, p. 5; in *FBIS-NES-95-127*, July 3, 1995, p. 47.

15. This was not, reportedly, the first time that this issue has come up in almost exactly this same way. In May 1995, Israeli journalists reported that the issue of Israel retaining a manned early-warning station on Mount Hermon had also resulted in a deadlock at the first Chiefs of Staff meeting, the previous

December--and that the Syrians had also at that time rejected an Israeli offer that, in return for their keeping the Mount Hermon station, the Syrians could be allowed to establish one in northern Israel, "either in Zefat or on Mount Meron." But still the Syrians had refused, basing their arguments, then as later, on the issue of their national sovereignty over the non-Lebanese slopes of Mount Hermon. See "Al-Asad Rejects Proposal on Early-Warning Station," in *Ma'ariv*, 29 May 95, p.3; in *FBIS-NES-95-103*, May 29, 1995.

16. Ze'ev Schiff, "U.S. Compromise Being Considered," *Ha'aretz*, July 2, 1995, pp. A1, A2, in *FBIS-NES-95-127*, July 3, 1995, p. 42.

17. See "'Text' of IDF Planning Document on Golan Security," *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, June 29, 1995, pp. 4-5, *FBIS-NES-95-126*, June 30, 1995, pp. 36-38, hereafter, Stauber/Netanyahu text.

18. "IDF Views Understandings Paper," *Ha'aretz*, June 30, 1995, p. A2, in *FBIS-NES-95-127*, July 3, 1995, pp. 48-50, hereafter, Stauber/ Ben text.

19. Stauber/Ben text, *op.cit.*, pp. 48-49.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 49. Words presented within slantlines in the *FBIS* translation of the Stauber/Ben text were published in the original *Ha'aretz* text, and presumably also in the leaked Stauber text, in English rather than Hebrew.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50, *passim*.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

23. *Loc. cit.*

24. *Op. cit.*, p. 50.

25. Stauber/Netanyahu text, pp. 36-37, *passim*.

26. *Loc. cit.*, p.38.
27. "Shahaq on 'Dialogue' With Syrians," IDF Radio in Hebrew, 0400 GMT, June 30, 1995, in *FBIS-NES-95-127*, July 3, 1995, p. 43.
28. *Ibid.*
29. "Israel Blamed . . ." See note 7 above.
30. Aluf Ben, "Syria Proposes 10:6 Demilitarization Ratio," *Ha'aretz*, July 3, 1995, pp. A1, A8, in *FBIS-NES-95-127*, July 3, 1995, p. 41.
31. *Ibid.*
32. "Israel Rejects Offer for 10:6 Demilitarization," Israel; Television Channel 1 in Hebrew, 1700 GMT, July 3, 1995, in *FBIS-NES-95-128*, July 5, 1995, p. 8.
33. Aluf Ben, "Israeli Sources: Syrian Offer 'Pleasant Surprise'," in *Ha'aretz*, July 4, 1995, p. A3, in *FBIS-NES-95-128*, July 5, 1995, p. 8.
34. "Book Claims Rabin Promised . . ." See note 9 above.
35. "Peres Comments on 2d Army Document," Tel Aviv: IDF Radio in Hebrew, 0400 GMT, June 30, 1995, in *FBIS-NES-95-127*, p. 45.
36. "Book Claims Rabin Promised . . .," *op.cit.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. In retrospect, this commitment to conclude a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement in the course of a year in which both Israel and the United States would see national leadership elections may--given the political dynamics involved in these campaigns--be seen as quixotic, at best.

39. "Baraq Doubts Results of Wye Plantation Talks," Jerusalem: Israel Television Channel 1 in Hebrew, 1800 GMT, January 26, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-019*. The reporter of this news story also quoted Barak as referring to Israel's Arab negotiators as, "20 guys wearing yellow jellabas."

40. "Peres Clashes With Expert, Criticizes 'Pessimism' on Syria," Jerusalem: Channel 2 Television Network in Hebrew, 1800 GMT, January 28, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-019*. This FBIS report also notes that a radio program one hour later reported that Peres denied that Shahak said that an agreement with Syria could be reached in 1996.

41. "Peres Comments on Progress of Syria Talks, Elections," Jerusalem: Israel Television Channel 1 in Hebrew, 1800 GMT, January 31, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-022*.

42. "Peres Announces Early Elections," Jerusalem: Israel Television Channel 1 in Hebrew, 1805 GMT, February 11, 1996; as translated in *FBIS-NES-96-029*. Later in this announcement, Peres seems to be spelling out that he delayed making a firm decision on the elections until after he had learned from his interlocutors in the peace talks that the talks could continue even during the election period.

43. "Deliberations on Memo of Understanding with U.S. Begin," *Ma'ariv*, February 25, 1996, p. 14, in *FBIS-NES-96-040*.

44. "Cabinet Decides to Suspend Talks with Syria," Tel Aviv: IDF Radio in Hebrew, 1858 GMT, March 4, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-044*, March 6, 1996.

45. "Rabinovich Foresees 'Indefinite' Freeze in Syrian Talks," Tel Aviv: IDF Radio in Hebrew, 0500 GMT, March 6, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-045*, March 3, 1996.

46. "Peres Interviewed on Bombings, Elections,

Syria," Jerusalem: Israel Television Channel 1 in Hebrew, 1825 GMT, March 6, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-046* of March 8, 1996.

47. "Party Official on Terrorism Charge, Peace," Damascus: Syrian Arab Television in Arabic, 1023 GMT, March 8, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-048*, March 12, 1996.

48. Quoted in *Civilian Pawns . . .*, *op.cit.*, p. 48.

49. Figures collated from *Civilian Pawns . . .*, *op.cit.*, p. 115.

50. See "'Change' in Peres Stance on Hizballah; Or Discusses Options," Jerusalem: Channel 2 Television in Hebrew, 1700 GMT, April 10, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-071*, April 12, 1996. In this report, the well-connected Israeli commentator Ehud Ya'ari noted that, "[O]fficial U.S. administration reactions have not called for restraint. This means that there is a feeling that the United States is currently clearing the way for whatever means Israel chooses to use and has not yet pursued."

51. "Israel Steps Up Lebanese Attacks," *The Washington Post*, April 13, 1996, p. A23; as cited in *Civilian Pawns . . .*, p. 59. By April 14, the number of Lebanese "villages," including presumably also towns and cities ordered evacuated by the Israelis had risen to 95; see "Chief of Staff Explains Lebanon Operation," Jerusalem: Israel television channel 1 in Hebrew, 1635 GMT, April 14, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-073*, April 16, 1996. Of course, Israel's summary and totally illegal order to residents of a neighboring country to leave their homes under threat of bombardment could not possibly be complied with by many, including old people, women with newborn babies, etc. Nor did the Israeli forces allow free transport northwards along the main coastal artery. Thus, Israeli claims that their orders to evacuate Lebanese villages showed them to be acting humanely seem bizarre at best.

52. "Baraq--Nothing to Discuss with Lebanon if Hizballah Active," Jerusalem: Israel Television Channel 1 in Hebrew, 1725 GMT, April 12, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-073*.

53. "Syria to Disarm Hizballah Under Political Accord," Jerusalem: Channel 2 Television in Hebrew, 1630 GMT, April 15, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-074*, April 17, 1996. This report, and its title, represented a degree of wishful thinking regarding the success of the new overture. See also "Peres Ready to Consider 'Serious' Proposals to End Fighting," Tel Aviv: IDF Radio in Hebrew, 1400 GMT, April 15, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-074*, April 17, 1996.

54. In fact, Syria's isolation had never been as great as presumed in Israel or the United States. On April 2, for example, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak had made the significant gesture of traveling to Damascus for a summit meeting with his Syrian counterpart.

55. See "Peres, Shahaq Brief Media on Lebanon Events," Jerusalem: Channel 2 Television in Hebrew, 1716 GMT, April 18, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-077*. But even if the placing of that particular salvo was a mistake, there is no contesting the fact that IDF gunners caused it. And indeed, if a political leadership orders a bombing campaign as vast, lengthy, and multifaceted as Grapes of Wrath, it must take responsibility for consequences of the "fog of war" that inevitably will be involved.

56. For the terms of the agreement, see "Text of Lebanese-Israeli Cease-fire 'Understanding'," *Kfar Killa: Voice of the South in Arabic*, 1610 GMT, April 26, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-083*, April 30, 1996.

57. "Christopher Cited on Resumption of Negotiations 'Soon'," Damascus: Syrian Arab Television in Arabic, 1730 GMT, April 26, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-*

083, April 30, 1996.

58. "Main Points of Lebanon-Israel Cease-Fire Agreement Viewed," Damascus: Syrian Arab Television in Arabic, 1800 GMT, April 26, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-083*, April 30, 1996. President Asad himself had remained very quiet in public throughout the whole Lebanon crisis, so in selecting quotes from his leader, Maqdisi had to rely on quotes from Asad's joint press conference with President Mubarak on April 2.

59. "Likud Chairman Netanyahu Attacks Lebanon Accord," Jerusalem: Channel 2 Television in Hebrew, 1700 GMT, April 26, 1996, in *FBIS-NES-96-083*, April 30, 1996.

60. In a telephone conversation in November 1996, Ze'ev Schiff estimated that the swing away from Mr. Peres among the Palestinian-Israeli voters that was provoked by Operation Grapes of Wrath was about 10 percent. This would more than account for Mr. Peres' loss.

61. See Arye Bender and Menahem Rahat, "Likud Drafts 'Softer' Government Guidelines," *Ma'ariv*, June 11, 1996, p. 16, in *FBIS-NES-96-113*, June 12, 1996.

62. On December 12, 1996, Reuter reported that the Group had found the IDF responsible for recently shelling two Lebanese villages, using deadly "flechette" shells that injured six civilians. "It was the third successive case in which the group has held Israel responsible for shelling a southern Lebanese village." *Washington Post*, December 13, 1996, p. A47.

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