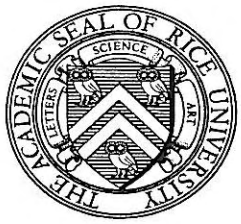

THE JAMES A. BAKER III
INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
OF
RICE UNIVERSITY

THE ISRAELI-SYRIAN DIALOGUE: A ONE-WAY TICKET TO PEACE?

URI SAGIE

THE ISAAC AND MILDRED BROCHSTEIN FELLOW
IN PEACE AND SECURITY IN HONOR OF
YITZHAK RABIN

OCTOBER 1999

JAMES A. BAKER III
INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

Major General Uri Sagie (Retired) was the first person appointed to the Isaac and Mildred Brochstein Fellow in Peace and Security in Honor of Yitzhak Rabin at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University. The enclosed monograph, "The Israeli-Syrian Dialogue: A One-Way Ticket to Peace?" is the product of his academic work at the Institute as a Baker Institute Fellow between July 1997 and December 1998.

As a Baker Institute Fellow, he also participated in the Baker Institute's Israeli-Syrian Working Group in 1998, which resulted in a Study entitled "The Prospects for the Israeli-Syrian Negotiations." (This Study is available on the Baker Institute Webpage and in print on request.)

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Biographic Note

MAJOR GENERAL URI SAGIE

Major General Uri Sagie (Retired) has had a long and distinguished career in the Israeli military. Joining the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) in 1961, he served as a company commander in the Golani Brigade on the Golan Heights during the Six Day War. During the War of Attrition, he commanded the reconnaissance unit of the Brigade and rose through the ranks to become, first, a battalion commander (1971-1973), and then the Brigade commander. While serving as commander of the Golani Brigade (1976-1978), he participated in the raid on Entebbe as one of the force commanders who successfully rescued the hostages. After his service in the Golani Brigade, he served as commander of an armored division on the Golan Heights (1979-1981); Chief of the Operations Department of the IDF GHQ and IDF representative to the peace talks with Lebanon (1981-1983); Assistant Deputy Chief of the General Staff (1983-1985); Commander of Southern Command (1985-1986), and Commander of Ground Forces Command (1986-1991). Major General Sagie was appointed the first Baker Institute Fellow in Peace and Security in honor of Yitzhak Rabin in 1997. He held this position until December, 1998. General Sagie is now a top advisor to Prime Minister Ehud Barak on the Israeli-Syrian negotiations. He accompanied Prime Minister Barak to the resumed Israeli-Syrian negotiations in Washington in December 1999 and to the talks in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in January 2000.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research paper analyzes the regional and global background to the Israeli-Syria dialogue since the 1991 Madrid Conference. Its chapters describe the dialogue between the two countries, their thinking and interests, and their assessments of the influence a peace agreement might have on them. There is also an attempt to examine the world views of the two leaders, Prime Minister Ehud Barak and President Hafez al-Asad, and to assess the likelihood of negotiations being resumed and their chances of success if they are.

The general conclusion is that Israel and Syria are now riper than ever for a breakthrough in the political process. The experience and ripeness of their political leaders could lead to a determined effort to move towards a peace agreement, which would provide both with domestic, regional and international gains. Though mutual suspicion, disputed issues and wide gaps between the parties remain, the problems are soluble if they can create a win-win negotiating situation -- to replace the zero sum game mentality in which every gain by one side is seen by the other as its loss -- and if the United States, in its superpower capacity, undertakes a major role in helping to bridge the gaps and underpin the peace. The Israeli-Syrian march towards peace will reflect their analysis of the alternatives and their view of the long-term processes that might serve their interests.

It seems to me that Israel and Syria have already gone a long way towards a peace arrangement. The main understandings between them can be summarized as follows:

a. **Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights:** The Syrians understood correctly that Israel made a commitment to withdraw from most of the Golan, if its requirements on security and the nature of peace are satisfied.

b. **Normalization:** Syria agreed to include most of the normalization clauses requested by Israel in the peace treaty, including full diplomatic relations and resident ambassadors, economic cooperation, trade, transport and tourism.

c. **The comprehensiveness of the agreement:** The parties agreed that accord with Syria would include a peace deal with Lebanon, that it would not be dependent on other agreements (for example, a final status agreement with the Palestinians) and that it would be accompanied by regional cooperation and reconciliation.

d. **The American role:** Israel and Syria agreed to active American involvement in the negotiations, to American backing for the security arrangements (including the possible involvement of U.S. forces, or American operation of an early-warning station on Mt. Hermon) and to American leadership in assembling an international economic package for regional and bilateral projects.

e. **Water:** Discussions between the parties reflected a joint interest in finding practical solutions to the water shortage, including a wider regional solution.

f. **Security arrangements:** A document of understanding ("Non-Paper") was formulated in May 1995, and a structured discussion begun on various security issues, with an emphasis on demilitarized zones and areas of limited forces, to assuage mutual fears.

But gaps between the parties should not be ignored:

a. **The extent of the withdrawal:** Israel is not prepared to pull back to the June 4, 1967 line, and the key question is whether agreement can be reached on the demarcation of an agreed border.

able to conduct tenacious, persistent and continuous negotiations, and sign a peace treaty between their two countries. It won't be easy. Both sides stands firm on what they regard as their vital interests. The domestic ground on both sides will have to prepared. Nevertheless, it seems to me that both leaders have the character to take brave decisions and on the Syrian side, Asad is also motivated by a sense of urgency and a desire not to miss another chance for an agreement. In my view, with the renewal of talks, both Barak and Asad will strive to lead and to shape the historical process, and they will make a supreme effort to reach an agreement.

Practically speaking, a series of steps needs to be taken in the next few months to create favorable conditions for a resumption of talks and for progress to be made in them. These include the creation of a positive atmosphere in the media, a renewed understanding in principle on the main components of the deal, agreement to put Lebanon near the top of the negotiating agenda (as part of an agreement in principle on the Golan Heights), with the aim of ending terror there and implementing a Lebanese security arrangement as a first stage in the implementation of agreements with Syria. The two countries will need to produce practical solutions for the water and border issues, jettisoning the legalistic positions that breed intransigence.

In the final analysis, renewed Israel-Syrian negotiations hold the promise of a breakthrough. The global and regional conditions are ripe, and both countries are waiting for tickets for the journey to peace. But it take great resolve from both of them, because the journey is one-way.

CHAPTER ONE
THE GLOBAL SETTING AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE ISRAELI-SYRIAN DIALOGUE

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

The end of the Cold War, and the Gulf War of 1991 that followed, established the United States as the world's only superpower. The U.S. today is the globe's central military, political, technological and economic power – spreading the message of free markets, liberalization, private enterprise and democracy. It has no equal ideological or global adversary, nor does it face any hostile alliance.

Moreover, most of the other economic powers (with high per capita Gross Domestic Products), like Japan and Germany, are U.S. allies. Even during the Cold War, the United States built an alliance with Western European and East Asian nations, on the security front via NATO, and economically through the G-7. Most of those countries, together with the new East European states, are also adherents of the twin principles of democracy and the free market.

The disintegration of the former Soviet Union left Russia as the principal East European state. But even though it retains its strategic weapons, it no longer has the political power to use them. Russia is not regarded as a great power -- not even in the Middle East. Its GDP is in constant decline, and its military power has decreased along with its ability to project power. As Russia turned inward to concentrate on its own problems, its influence on Middle Eastern regional developments declined markedly.

Today, Moscow is absorbed by its own mainly economic problems, while at the same time protecting principally those vital interests close to its borders, in its "near abroad." That includes the improvement of relations with the new states of the former Soviet Union (CIS), which were once connected to her by their umbilical

cords. Economic interests in Europe, Central Asia and other areas including the Middle East -- which include military exports -- have been assigned priority.

Despite the objections they have voiced to the expansion of NATO, it seems that the Russians have accepted, for lack of any other choice, the tightening of security ties between the United States and Europe, and the states of Eastern Europe -- as well as NATO's role in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, as exemplified by the intervention in the Kosovo crisis.

NATO, indeed, has been strengthened as a political-defense organization, and as the cornerstone of European relations. Its existence as an organic structure with traditions and accepted procedures enabled organizational cooperation with the new East European states, seeking a defense "umbrella" to assure their stability after cutting themselves off from Moscow. The alliance's military intervention in the states of the former Yugoslavia, including air attacks on Serbia, and before that the military pressure on Iraq, based on the power of the NATO member states, demonstrated that NATO still has a role in Europe, the Balkans and regional crisis spots. There was also a concomitant strengthening of the trans-Atlantic connection between the U.S. and Europe. The Jubilee Conference and NATO's "new strategic concept" created a new framework for cooperation and enlargement that will ensure that NATO remains the world's most important defense and political alliance on the eve of the 21st Century.

Europe's main objective today is progress in the Eastern European process of democratic and economic reform, together with the preservation of stability and the prevention of national-ethnic conflicts in its close periphery. Development of mutual trust and cooperation with Russia is a European interest, together with a strengthening of the economic and trade frameworks. Friction with the United States, on political and economic issues, still exists, but it appears that American dominance and its predominant global role are also fait accompli to Europe.

In the Far East, the United States has preserved its close ties with Japan, seeing it as a partner in progress towards stability in Asian crisis areas as well as in the Middle East. At the same time, the U.S. economy has demonstrated its stability and

its resistance to the crises affecting U.S.-oriented Asian economies. China's rising economic and military might, its impressive growth rates and burgeoning technology, may put it in a position, uniquely perhaps, to challenge American global domination, although it currently has no ambitions in that direction. On the other hand, there are centrifugal forces in China, and it needs both American technology and access to the U.S. market. The central question, looking ahead, is this: Will China realize its potential to become a strategic adversary of the United States, or will the economic processes lead it towards more democratization and international cooperation? It appears to me that in the coming years, at least, economic considerations will continue to dominate Chinese foreign policy.

Finally, the following conclusions stem from a strategic view of the international situation:

a. The United States will not turn inward or give up its position of global leadership. It has not chosen to share that role or its global undertakings with other centers of power like Europe, Japan or Russia.

b. On the contrary, despite pressures on resources and budgets, U.S. administrations (Bush and Clinton) have deepened their determination to play a leading role in shaping the international system, while recognizing U.S. responsibility for peace and stability.

c. As a result, the United States succeeded in dictating to the international community and to key regional players a set of objectives and an agenda based largely on its own foreign-policy interests: progress on global political and economic stability, democratization, non-proliferation of unconventional, missile and nuclear weaponry (especially from Russia and some Asian countries), the war against terror, and isolation of radical regimes.

d. In order to attain these objectives, the Americans have taken steps to preserve their military and technological superiority, and the U.S.'s ability to fight two regional wars simultaneously. This declared policy, together with an

American readiness to use force against radical regimes (rogue states) like Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan and recently Serbia, has reinforced the U.S. deterrent against threats to the world order.

e. The lack of a balancing power has increased America's "independence" and room for maneuver in regional crises. Even though this does not guarantee success (against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, the India-Pakistan nuclear arms race, or Iranian acquisition of sophisticated armaments), there is no doubt that the relative freedom of movement (including neutralization of the U.N.) eases the U.S. decision-making process in dealing with international crises, and to a great extent also imposes a significant constraint on regional players seeking to realize their interests at America's expense.

HOW HAVE GLOBAL CHANGES INFLUENCED THE MIDDLE EAST?

GENERAL

The end of the Cold War, and the 1991 Gulf War, sparked positive processes in the Middle East, principally, the speeding up of the regional political process, which blunted the Israeli-Arab conflict and led to formal agreements on peace and regional economic cooperation. Still, with the approach of the year 2000, the Middle East retains its potential for instability, because of the fragility of these processes, the economic difficulties in key countries affected by growing Islamic radicalism, terror and the proliferation of non-conventional weapons. The weakness of democracy in the region is another cause for concern, because war-and-peace decisions are concentrated in the hands of a few. There are, however, some advantages to the concentration of power and authority in small elite groups. When Arab leaders are ready for a change in political direction, they have the power and authority to make it.

It is important to observe, at least in a general way, the deep significance the international changes have had for the Middle East, and for Israel and Syria in particular. These changes will affect the character of the Israeli-Syrian dialogue, its

pace and the directions in which it develops. In other words, the way in which the regional players interpret the global processes, their assessments of how these processes affect their interests and their regional standing will affect their behavior in the process, a subject I will discuss in greater detail later in this paper.

THE ARAB ENVIRONMENT

In the Arab environment, international changes have produced the following:

a. A sense of shock and confusion following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was the main source of support for the Arab states and backed them in previous Israeli-Arab crises.

b. Increasing Arab recognition of the power and technological prowess of the United States, and the military advantages Israel derives from its special relationship with the U.S.

c. An awareness of the futility of the "force option" against Israel, as a lever for attaining political objectives. Pan-Arab ideology, which saw a military victory over Israel as the cure for the ills of the Arab world, has lost ground. (The Israelis have undergone a similar change in their understanding of the limits of power. This subject will be discussed later.)

d. An increase in particularistic Arab interests, reflected in the lack of Arab unity, inter-Arab conflicts and the different attitudes of Arab players with regard to the political process with Israel. Israel is no longer the focal point of the Arab consensus. The ideology of hostility towards Israel has been balanced by the need for political pragmatism to attain Arab objectives.

e. As a result, there has been a greater willingness to accept Israel's existence, to sign separate agreements with Israel and to accept Israel's integration in the region. But there remains a fear of Israeli hegemony, stemming from

Jerusalem's close ties with Washington and from Israel's distinctive character in the Middle East.

f. The Arab states and the Palestinians see a more pressing need to improve relations with the United States, in an effort to "balance" in some way what is for them a disconcerting equation. Declaration of willingness to engage in the political process with Israel and consideration for America's regional interests are aimed at upgrading relations with Washington, as part of a strategic effort to balance the U.S.'s Middle Eastern attitudes.

But, ironically, the global changes also exposed difficulties in the Arab world, and the gap between it and the dynamic changes talking place outside the region:

a. The relatively closed nature of Arab society and the difficulty it has responding to global changes of openness and internal liberalization were exposed. The notion of political democracy failed to permeate most of the Arab states, or more accurately, it advanced at a much slower, more cautious pace. The main centers of power remained in the hands of the security services and the political elites clustered around the regime.

b. Economic weakness remains a main defining characteristic. The Arab economies are in dire straits, (with slow growth, large external debt, problems of unemployment, accelerated population growth, lack of water resources, and lack of development) and find it difficult to adapt to the world trend towards globalization. They are not attractive to new capital and investment, and their private sectors are small and insignificant. Economic progress is slow, particularly in Syria, which is at pains not to "slide" into political democracy. In the Arab countries, the weakness of civil society and of the middle class is apparent. In any event, it seems that the economic factor (as well as others) can be characterized as slowing down anything pertaining to relations with Israel or the use of military force against her.

c. Radical Islam, operating in Arab countries as a religious-nationalist-social-cultural movement in opposition to the secular regimes, militates against the penetration of the West, its culture and values, and the improvement of relations with Israel. Other more pragmatic ideologies, such as "Middle-Easternism," are confined to minority elites. They do not have a power base or foothold among the masses, while radical Islamic terror undermines the Arab regimes and their ability to move forward consistently, without crises in the political process. Islamic opposition elements, in almost every Arab state, present themselves as an alternative to the pragmatic approach towards Israel, should it fail.

d. Still, there is an effort to acquire military equipment to reduce the imbalance vis-a-vis Israel. Iran, Iraq and Syria continue to acquire non-conventional weaponry, designed to bolster their regional standing and to narrow what is seen as the qualitative-technological gap with Israel. (Against these efforts, the United States is a blocking and moderating force.)

Along with the attempt to find common denominators among the Arab states, it should be emphasized that today it is difficult to speak of a coherent, unified Arab system. On the contrary:

a. The global changes have had less influence on the pro-Western Arab states, like Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, which where in any case in the American super-power orbit. On the other hand, radical states (like Syria and Iraq) absorbed a much greater shock, and their world views were irrevocably undermined.

b. Among the Arab players, a race developed around relations with Israel, with the Palestinians, Jordan and Syria giving priority to their own particular interests. The Arab consensus, or the notion of comprehensive peace, has become an amorphous idea, used by each country in a different way, without it interfering in its bilateral negotiations with Israel.

With regard to the peace process, it is clear that global developments accentuated the positive incentives for the Arab states and the Palestinians, who expected progress on the peace front to lead to a change in their relations with the U.S. and to economic dividends. But they also raised suspicions and fears that the process carried with it internal challenges, like those in Eastern Europe, and could lead to a loosening of the bonds of centralization and the break-down of the delicate balances in Arab societies, especially the more closed ones, like Syria.

In summary, the way the global changes were absorbed in Arab world depended on the nature of each local regime. Still, the following generalizations can be made:

a. The standing of the U.S. and its Arab allies was strengthened.

b. Radical Arab regimes were weakened and isolated.

c. The Middle East peace process gained momentum, registered significant achievements, and demonstrated that Arab states attain more through political means than by the use of military force.

d. A positive change took place in the relations between most Arab states and Israel, the ideological approach was weakened to the extent that there is no longer any "Grand Design" vis-a-vis Israel. In its stead, policies that serve individual state interests have evolved.

e. The nature of the threats against peace and stability has changed. The emergence of radical Islam as an adversary of the Arab regimes revealed, at least indirectly, a mutual interest between Israel and some Arab states.

f. The fragmentation of the Arab world was accelerated.

g. Most Arab states took a defensive position against the wave of change that swept the world, fearing that it would permeate the region, and have a negative impact on the stability of their regimes.

THE VIEW FROM JERUSALEM

In its democracy, stability, resilience, military power and technological-economic superiority, Israel is an exceptional Middle Eastern state. To a large extent, it holds the key to future regional development.

The global changes affecting the region worked to Israel's advantage, and reinforced the impression in the international community that the peace process strengthens Israel, its regional and international standing. The West sees continuation of the process as essential in preventing a retreat into radicalism and instability, which could spread beyond the boundaries of the Middle East. Such a deterioration would, of course, threaten Western interests (the preservation of pro-Western regimes, protection of the oil routes and halting the spread of radical Islam). Consequently, the international community tends to regard Israel as responsible for the nature of regional developments, for better or for worse.

From the Israeli point of view, too, the global developments served its interests. The historic American "victory" in the Cold War brought with it an increased sense of security in Israel, one of the principal (and democratic) allies of the winning side. The projection of American power in the Middle East through the Gulf War, as well as the intimacy of Israel's bilateral ties with Washington, provided a positive lever for Israel in its efforts to advance the peace process with the Arab states.

THE POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES

For most of the past decade, Israel has sought to take advantage of the global changes to achieve a number of important goals.

a. **The political dimension** - Israel was the determining force in setting the pace on the various negotiating tracks. In the days of Rabin and Peres, the freedom of maneuver and "play" between the tracks enabled Israel to reach a breakthrough on the Palestinian track, peace with Jordan and phased normalization in its relations with Arab states in the Gulf and North Africa. Over the last three years, under the right-wing Netanyahu government, the process floundered. Still, it still emerged that:

1. The Arab world was divided and fragmented, and found it difficult to maintain a coherent position vis-a-vis Israel. The Palestinians continued to negotiate with Israel, while the Syrians insisted they would only return to the negotiations from the point where they were stopped, which, they claimed, included an Israeli commitment to withdraw from the entire Golan Heights.

2. The process of normalization was frozen, but relations with Arab states (i.e. Jordan) continued, and Israel even succeeded in developing relations with an important Moslem state, like Turkey, thereby reinforcing its regional standing, (even if this development was frowned upon by most Arab states).

3. It became clear that the Arab players had no strategic option but to continue the dialogue and the peace process, albeit at a much slower pace.

4. Despite some hiccups in U.S.-Israel relations, the close security relationship between the two countries was maintained. In practice, this underlined the fact that Arab hopes for an "imposed American solution" were futile. With few exceptions, there were no Americans in power who advocated imposing a solution on Israel against its will.

b. **The security dimension** - Israel's special defense relationship with the United States, together with the preservation of Israeli military superiority vis-a-vis radical Arab states and the disappearance of superpower support for them

from the Soviet Union, brought about a change in the order of threats against Israel and to an increasing sense of security. In this context, the following should be emphasized:

1. The option of a general Arab-Israeli war is no longer on the agenda. The focus shifted to parameters of confrontation between the peace camp and radical Arab opponents of peace, who sought to undermine the political process (particularly by terror from Lebanon, with Iranian and Syrian backing, and by Palestinian opposition organizations in the territories.)

2. At the end of the Cold War, the U.S. and its allies saw the proliferation of missiles and non-conventional weaponry as a real threat to the west. The Iraqi arms program and Iran's nuclear efforts created a global awareness of the threat posed to Israel. In recent years, the international community exhibited greater cooperation and coordination (under American leadership) toward containment and improving the response to missiles and non-conventional weapons - even though there are differences, principally regarding the approach to Iran.
   It is worth noting in this context, that at about the same time as the Wye River Agreements with the Palestinians, in October 1998, Israel and the United States signed a Memorandum of Understanding involving increased cooperation against missile and non-conventional weaponry. This understanding was reinforced during the new Israeli prime minister's visit to Washington at the start of his term in July 1999.

3. Israel has developed and broadened its relations on the international arena. Extensive ties have been developed (including in the security-military field) with important nations like Russia, China and India, lifting the sense of isolation and siege that for years hung over Israeli decision-makers.

c. **The economic dimension** - Israel is, justifiably, seen as the Middle Eastern country most prepared for integration in the emerging globalized economy,

while most Arab states find it difficult to adjust to developments in globalized trade, the spread of high-tech, the rise of the private sector and the process of liberalization. The peace process, the weakening of the Arab boycott and the recognition of Israel's technological and human resources have made Israel an attractive target for investment and international operations.

PROBLEM AREAS

Along with the positive consequences, problems from Israel's point of view concerning its regional environment have also emerged:

1. Breakthroughs in the peace process remain only partial. On the Palestinian track, there have still been no negotiations on the most sensitive, difficult problems on the final-status agenda, while on the Syrian front, the difficulties caused by differences on territorial and security issues and Syria's digging-in on its opening positions have come to the fore.

2. Arab states continue to view the normalization issue as a hostage to extract additional Israeli concessions. Since late 1995, the multinational negotiations have been effectively frozen, with the parties (including Egypt) conditioning their resumption on progress in the bilateral arena.

3. The Israeli view of peace has not penetrated the broad masses of the Arab peoples. Expressions of hostility and incitement against Israel in most Arab countries persist.

4. Terror and violence are still seen as a legitimate weapon against Israel, to be used to balance the Jewish state's strategic superiority. A terrorist infrastructure still exists in the territory of the Palestinian Authority, while Syria, like most Arab states, distinguishes between opposition to terror and support of the legitimate right of peoples to fight for liberation from occupation, and Damascus uses the terror card in Lebanon to

pressure Israel on the Golan Heights issue. Syrian and other Arab states continue efforts to arm themselves with non-conventional weapons, which are seen as a partial, "poor-man's" answer to Israel's sophisticated capabilities.

5. The position taken by Arab states reflects a narrow view of peace with Israel. Most would like to see Israel, in the peace era, downsized in territory (returning to the 1967 borders), with weakened defense assets. Normalization is also seen in a narrow, minimalist sense, as a necessary concession to Israel. The clear impression is that even after peace, there will remain a substantive debate in the Arab world on the substance of post-peace relations with Israel. It is reasonable to assume that the Arab world will continue to see Israel as a strategic adversary, which must be prevented from achieving regional hegemony, which would be at the Arab states' expense.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS

It seems to me that the internal Israeli political system has undergone a series of dramatic changes over the past decade, which could be defined by the term "awakening." Israeli society today:

a. Is less "ideological" on questions of foreign affairs and defense, with most of the major social rifts and political divisions over domestic issues, (social and religious). Subconsciously, it appears -- if it is possible to speak this way about the "collective I" of the nation -- that Israeli society has effectively ended the argument over national borders and wants to look inward. In this context, there is no doubt that the "legitimization" that the Netanyahu-led Likud government gave to the Oslo Agreements led to an acceptance of the view that the historic land of Israel will be divided in the future. The Golan Heights are not seen as part of the "historic homeland," and in my view most of the settlers will be able to accept a significant withdrawal from the Golan.

b. Is more focused on questions of economics and technology, and it clearly senses that that the strength of a country and its national security are more accurately measured on an economic and technological scale, than simply by its defense investments. The clear current Israeli preference is to seek political solutions and to devote national resources and attention to socio-economic development. Military solutions to problems of security and foreign affairs hold less appeal than they did in the past. In my view, though, despite the change in priorities, no one should doubt the spirit of volunteering and mobilization in Israel in an emergency, when its security and vital interests are threatened. Even today, the level of volunteering for elite units in the Israel Defense Forces is high.

c. Has a diminished fixation on power and military strength. The Yom Kippur War of 1973, Operation Peace for the Galilee (the 1982 Lebanese War), and the Palestinian Intifada have demonstrated the limits of Israeli power. What is now sought is no longer "historic justice," but pragmatic solutions that include an understanding of the aspirations and legitimate needs of the Arab side.

d. Is much more mature with regard to the concept of "regional peace." There is a retreat from the notion of a "New Middle East" that prevailed in the early 1990s, and the current view of regional cooperation is more modest. The assumption is still that progress on peace will have a positive influence on the nations of the region, but subject to several fundamental conditions being fulfilled: diversion of investment and resources from defense to economic and social needs, development of human resources, stability that will attract large investments, development of the private sector and regional infrastructure projects, like water desalination. All of these projects, however, will take time, and will only come to the fore in the long run. In other words, Israel seeks peace first, and only afterwards will it probe more deeply into its content.

e. Still, it seems to me, that the Israeli public yearns for a substantial change in its relations with the Arab states, particularly with Syria. To get support (in the referendum to which the prime minister is committed) for a withdrawal from the Golan, the public will have to be convinced that, over and above security, Israel has achieved reconciliation with the Syrians. In addition to the paper on which the peace treaty is written, there will have to tangible signs of what Asad calls "natural relations," which is in effect what is meant by normalization. Looking at it this way, from Israel's point of view, normalization is security at its deepest level.

SIGNIFICANCE TO ISRAEL

From an examination of regional and international developments, it seems to me that Israel can safely conclude that in the coming years, the gap between it and its neighbors will not diminish. The contrasting character of the economies makes it difficult to envision economic and trade cooperation between Israel and the Arab states, other than, perhaps, between Israel and Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. The Israeli economy will continue to turn to Western markets.

Therefore from the start of the year 2000 and for several years after that, Israel can make the following working assumptions:

a. The Middle East will remain non-homogenous, and not fully stable. Opposing views -- in politics, culture and religion -- will remain prominent. Although global and regional trends led to a near-acceptance of Israel's existence, the common denominator in almost all Arab states, with the exception of Jordan, is a desire to see an Israel that is weakened in terms of its territorial dimensions, its strategic assets and its international relationships.

b. Given this approach, the Arab interest is to prevent Israeli hegemony and domination in an era of peace. The fear of an Israeli takeover, whether by strategic military power or by economic, technological, political or even

cultural means, runs through the Arab world. In other words, no Arab country wants Israel to be the key state in the region.

c. Israel will continue (certainly during the few years of peace) to face strategic threats, including those from far-away states like Iran and Iraq. The significance: Relations of peace will not in themselves eradicate strategic threats, but may create a framework and an atmosphere to limit or prevent such threats from being carried out. For Israel, security considerations will continue to be given the highest priority in any future negotiation.

d. The preservation of Israel's independent deterrent capacity and decisive military edge, coupled with the ongoing special relationship with the United States, plays a decisive role in the strengthening of regional stability. This is the basis of Israel's current defense doctrine, and will remain equally valid under conditions of peace.

e. The implications of the peace process for the economics of the region are still unclear. Foreign capital has not flowed into the region, economic and political problems persist and military spending still occupies a prominent (albeit not exclusive) place in Arab national investment and thinking. Problems of demographics and water, and competition over resources, are likely to produce future disputes and tensions.

f. In the coming years, Israel will remain a unique Middle Eastern state due to its democracy, its stability, its economic potential and high level of human capital. Although this will enhance her economic and political standing in the region and internationally, it will also give her a threatening image in the Arab world.

g. Israel does not regard itself as threatening any state in the region. Nevertheless, many countries in the region regard Israel as a threat to their

security and vital interests. These perceptions complicate Israel's security considerations. Perhaps comprehensive peace will change that.

h. Peace with the Arab states may assume a different character, depending on the nature of the regimes in the Arab countries, and their positive contact with Israel. It is doubtful that Israel will reach peace with all Arab states. It is preferable to seek "good peace" (from a strategic-security point of view) than to insist on imposed elements of normalization, which may well be of little benefit to the Israeli people.

i. Attaining peace will allow Israel to reorder its domestic priorities, to reduce its defense spending and to raise the standard of living - a trend in keeping with the change in Israeli society, from collective values to greater individualism and self-realization.

j. In a state of peace, Israel will be able, if asked, to share with Arab states its experience and know-how to help improve living standards. This element of investment in its neighbors' welfare is a clear Israeli interest with security and strategic significance.

THE VIEW FROM DAMASCUS

A decade after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Gulf War, the regime of President Hafiz al-Asad finds itself at a point of distinct weakness. Even if Syria continues to see itself as a key regional player, as the Syrians speak of themselves, it seems that the global and regional trends have not been to its advantage. From Damascus's point of view, there has been a string of developments that are problematic:

a. The disappearance of the Soviet Union as Syria's strategic superpower prop, which always supported Damascus at any sign of crisis in the past. It is a telling fact that President Asad made his first visit to Moscow in July 1999, almost a decade after the collapse of the U.S.S.R.

b. The collapse of the threat of the "Eastern Front" against Israel, after Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War. This development effectively eliminated the idea of "strategic parity" which Syria sought to establish, with the aid of its Arab allies, vis-a-vis Israeli power. Today, Syria is concerned at the U.S. effort to bring about a change of the regime in Iraq. Though there is no love lost between the world's two Ba'ath party regimes, the establishment of a pro-Western Iraqi regime in Baghdad is anathema to Syria.(1)

c. Reinforcement of America's standing in the Middle East, where Damascus justifiably sees Washington as an historic ally of Israel, Syria's main "enemy." On many occasions, Asad has expressed his strong reservations about the "new world order" with one superpower, while expressing his hopes for the establishment of a "multi-polar" world order.(2) The United States still regards Syria as a terror-supporting state (and therefore precluded from receiving U.S. aid.)

d. Agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty (and before that, the Israeli-Egyptian peace), together with the progress in the multilateral negotiations (in which Syrian did not participate) have highlighted the divisions in the Arab camp, Syria's isolation and the decline in its power to prevent processes it opposes. Asad's statement, in March 1999, that "peace with Israel will not be reached, unless there is peace among the Arabs themselves," reflects, in my view, Syrian pessimism over its ability to set up a united front against Israel in the future.(3)

e. In addition, Israel's improving relations with Turkey, and what Damascus sees as tripartite Israeli-Turkish-Jordanian strategic cooperation, with American back-up, deepens Syrian fears of being "surrounded" by military alliances directed against "Arabic-Moslem solidarity" in general, and Syria in particular.(4)

To these developments, whose significance is a political and military weakening of Syria and a widening strategic gap in Israel's favor, can be added Syria's economic and domestic weaknesses that gathered momentum during the course of the 1990s:

a. The current state of the Syrian economy, particularly over the last two or three years, is not good! There is a severe recession, exports have declined by 20 percent, drought has hurt agriculture, there is a shortage of water, oil resources are depleting and foreign investments, including those from the Gulf, have declined significantly.

b. Today, the Syrian economy is in drastic need of structural reform, to equip it for growth -- by encouraging the private sector, increasing efficiency and fighting corruption -- at the expense of the public sector. I think Asad understands this very well. It explains the Syrian effort (since May 1997) (5) to improve its relations with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and with European states, as well as its desire to encourage foreign investment in the Syrian economy. But militating against progress is the Syrian fear of a policy of rapid economic reform, which might force political reforms that could endanger the regime.

c. There is also the increasingly acute question of Asad's successor. The president's life expectancy is not high, prompting him to make efforts to assure the smooth transition of power, preferably to his son Bashaar. Much of this is taking place in the military, which in the recent past has undergone a number of personnel changes whose objective is to bring in fresh blood, from Bashaar's generation.

d. It seems to me that Asad must have a sense of ongoing strategic failure, regarding his inability to retrieve lost Syrian honor and prominence by regaining the Golan Heights, by a combination of military and diplomatic efforts. It's not clear to him whether his son will be able to do so in the future, because at least during the initial period, he will have to devote most

of his attention to steadying his regime internally. In other words, there is a perceived need to move quickly to attain this key Syrian strategic objective (return of the Golan.)

e. Beyond that, the great disappointment of the Asad regime over the past decade appears to be the stagnation in its relations with the United States. Neither the Madrid process nor Syrian participation in the Gulf War, at the side of the United States, opened strategic doors for Asad in Washington. At most, it enabled an opening whose size was dependent on the state of Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

Therefore, since the freezing of the Syrian-Israeli dialogue in the mid-1990s, there have been no significant developments in Syrian-U.S. relations. The Syrians were disappointed and frustrated by the level of American involvement and by the lack of willingness, in their view, to apply pressure on Israel. In addition, Syria remained on the list of "terror states," despite its diplomatic efforts to be removed. (the most Syria was able to extract from the United States was removal from the drug list in 1997). The main significance of Syria's being on the list of states supporting terror was the damage it did to the Syrian image, and the limitations it put on development of economic and trade relations between the U.S. and Syria, since it precluded American companies from doing business with Syria.

In Syrian eyes, the aggressive U.S. policy on proliferation (Iraq) and terror (Sudan, Afghanistan), which included use of force against those states, was designed to serve Israeli interests and to weaken the Arab states. The Syrians repeatedly criticized what they saw as America's biased policy in the region, and opposed what was seen as America's encouragement of regional axes hostile to Syria (like Turkey-Israel) and the attempt to bring about the partition of Iraq.

The Syrian frustration with the United States increased as Syria realized that while American-Israeli relations remained stable over the years, the image of Syria in the U.S. Congress and in the wider American public remained low and problematic, against the background of Syria's formal inclusion in the list of terror-

First and foremost, Asad can take heart at his success in establishing (with the United States, Israel and the international community) his concept that there can be no peace unless Israel withdraws completely from the Golan Heights. The acceptance of this position enables Asad to maintain a "steadfast stance" vis-a-vis the various players. In retrospect, it is possible to determine that the beginning of the political process reflected "the strategic Syrian decision" to make peace with Israel - but on its terms. Syria stuck to its familiar positions, first of all to its demand for an Israeli withdrawal to the lines of June 4, 1967, and to equal, balanced and mutual security arrangements, while waiting for flexibility from Israel.

The operative significance of this is that in the Syrian view, despite its difficulties in negotiations with Israel, its isolation, weakness and disadvantage on the regional and domestic fronts, that at least on the question of a peace arrangement with Israel, Syria stood its ground and did not show weakness. That is to say on the territorial issue. The argument, in the Syrian view, would be over the nature of peace, its form and conditions, but not over basic assumption that the Golan Heights would be returned to Syria.

So Asad can expect positive developments in U.S.-Syrian relations to stem from the resumption of the negotiations. It should be recalled that during the years of Israeli-Syrian talks in 1991-95, a relatively close dialogue developed between the Syrians and the Americans. It was expressed through dozens of visits of the U.S. secretary of state and the U.S. peace team to Damascus, when Syria was recognized as a senior, central player in efforts to carve out a regional agreement. It became clear to the Syrians that from the point of view of the Americans (and Israel), Damascus held the key to an overall settlement, including a solution to the Lebanese issue. This period was also utilized for Syrian-American discussions on economic-political cooperation. in the event of a new era in relations between the two countries (this subject is discussed in a separate chapter).

Asad can draw encouragement from the following additional developments:

supporting states (also from Lebanon), and its being regarded as non-democratic and as undermining U.S. interests in the Middle East. Damascus blames the pro-Israel lobby in the United States for playing a major role in the besmirching of Syria's name in the U.S.

A mark of the tenseness of the relationship can be seen in Asad's complaint that, in its second term, the Clinton administration had become "ineffective" in the political process. Against the background of the American use of force against Iraq in late 1998, a crisis developed over protest demonstrations in Damascus, during which U.S. flags were burned and the U.S. embassy in the Syrian capital was seriously damaged.(6) The U.S. stance in the Turkish-Syrian crisis, where Washington sided with Turkish demands on terror (elimination of the PKK camps in Syria) further fueled the tension and suspicion.

In the final analysis, it seems to me that over the last few years, the Syrian sense of friction with the United States has grown more acute. The Syrian expectation that, during his second term, Clinton would be relieved of election pressures and would push for progress on the Syrian track, at Damascus's whim, failed to materialize. The Syrians were also sidetracked by the attention paid to the Palestinian issue. Against this background, Asad adopted a policy that reflected two aspects of his relations with the United States: on the one hand, less consideration of American regional interests, and, on the other, a parallel effort to emphasize that without Syria there would be no regional peace. On the other hand, Asad understands that he must not push things too far. The United States is still the superpower with the key to progress in the peace process.(7) The Syrian hope, based on past experience: a breakthrough in the peace process is likely to bring an improvement in Syrian-U.S. relations.

LIGHTS IN THE FOG

So far, we have surveyed the shadows and problems surrounding the Syrian view of global and regional developments. Still, in my view, the Syrian assessment contains positive points, even if they attach less weight to them.

a. A reduction in Syrian-Turkish tensions after the two countries' agreement on the issue of the PKK, even if the reservoirs of hostility and suspicion remain deep. In addition, the Israeli-Turkish relationship had a worrying disadvantage from Israel's point of view: it was perceived by Arab states as a policy designed to "divide and rule" in the Arab-Moslem world.

b. Developments in Jordan (the passing of King Hussein, and his replacement by King Abdullah) which prompted a Syrian attempt to "pull" Jordan towards Damascus, and to distance the Hashemite Kingdom from Israel and Turkey.(8)

c. Continued deadlock on the multilateral track and in the process of normalization between Israel and the Arab world - although, in my view, Damascus fears the deadlock is only temporary and that things will improve during the Barak government's term.

d. Israel's distress in Lebanon, where playing the "terror card" has aided Syrian efforts to link Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon (Syria fears a unilateral Israeli pullback) to withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Over the past decade, Syria has also strengthened its hold on Lebanese as a client state and as a "card" to be used in future negotiations with Israel. Today it is almost universally accepted that a deal in Lebanon depends on the negotiations over the Golan Heights.

e. Despite the absence of a military-strategic balance between Israel and Syria, Syrian military capabilities -- including chemical weapons – cannot be lightly disregarded, and allow Asad to present Syria as a buffer against Israel's ambitions for regional hegemony and potential for regional "adventurism."

Still, together with the internal weakness expressed in the decline in the preparedness of the Syrian army and its inferiority vis-as-vis Israel, the failing economy, demographic problems and diminishing natural resources, Asad can point to

internal stability as an achievement. He has a firm grip on Syria and on its centers of power, despite his advanced age and the periodic reports of his frail health. If there were fears in Damascus that global trends would affect internal affairs and the future of the Alawi regime, they have, to a great extent, faded. Still, it is crystal clear that peace with Israel, seen as a totally Western state, will create a sense of threat to Syrian domestic stability as it exists today.

THE OVERALL BALANCE IN SYRIAN EYES

It appears to me that from Asad's point of view, at the pinnacle of the ruling pyramid in Damascus, Syria stands at a crossroads with regard to its development in the 21st century. The main challenges facing Asad are:

a. To guarantee the stability of the Syrian regime, and with it the existence of Syria as a secular state, able to carry out, even in careful stages, economic reforms, as part of an effort to adjust to global changes. In this connection, the regime has a clear interest in investment and growth accelerated by external aid. But Asad must take into account possible negative effects on the Sunni Moslem economic and cultural elite, which sees itself threatened by liberalizing trends, which could expose it to competition.

b. To move the peace process with Israel forward in an effort to make Syrian gains on the Golan, in Lebanon and in the regional and international spheres. All this, without peace bringing about internal shocks, which could upset the delicate balances in Syrian society, where the minority Alawites are at the political-military apex. Asad must be convinced, therefore, that peace will promote the preservation of the Alawite regime, (keeping it in his family's hands,) and not pose a threat to its survival..

c. To create a key regional role for Syria, so that, even after peace with Israel, it is not relegated to the margins of regional politics, compared to more central countries like Egypt and Israel. The element of prestige and honor will come into play here. In other words: Syria will make efforts to ensure

that peace does not lead to a diminution of its importance, particularly in American eyes. The key question is whether Syria will be able to present itself to Washington as a contributor to regional stability, and if the U.S. will assign Damascus regional tasks to strengthen its standing in internal Arab politics. Israel could make a contribution here in persuading the U.S. of the need to compensate Syria financially for making peace with Israel, as was the case with Egypt.

d. And finally, a decisive question from the Syrian point of view is its place in the queue for a dialogue and a breakthrough with Israel. The Syrian interest is to reach agreement with Israel before the Palestinians do. Then Damascus will be able to emphasize its key role in the area, and will be relieved of the fear that resolution of Palestinian final-status issues will weaken the Syrian bargaining position. The central question: To what extent will Syria be willing to make real efforts to get an agreement with Israel in the face of competing activity on the Palestinian track.

The bottom line is this: When the Syrian president considers the best way of attaining this complex of objectives, he increasingly sees a peace agreement with Israel as the most suitable answer to the challenges faced by his country.(9)

At this stage, it seems appropriate to turn to a brief analysis of the Israeli-Syrian dialogue, from the Madrid conference of 1991 to the election of Israel's new prime minister, Ehud Barak, in May 1999, to examine the agreements and differences, and assess to what extent they are capable of reaching an agreement.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ISRAELI-SYRIAN DIALOGUE SINCE MADRID

GENERAL

The shock and confusion in Syria following the regional and global developments of the early 1990s, especially the recognition of American technological and military supremacy and the consequent difficulty of achieving strategic balance with Israel, led to a strategic decision in Damascus to seek accommodation with the Jewish state. Of course, it would have to be on Syria's terms: Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 lines; a relatively rapid timetable for withdrawal; minimal security arrangements; and strictly limited normalization, both in substance and in the pace of its development.

Therefore, virtually no Syrian "confidence building measures" (CBM) towards Israel were taken. The few that were, allowing Syrian Jews to leave, an interview Syria's foreign minister granted to Israel Television in 1995 and talks in 1994 and 1995 between the chiefs of staff of the two armies, made little impression on Israeli public opinion. In 1994, there was an attempt at military CBM (clearing the Syrian limited forces zone of infringements) but it was not done in a political context and was not exploited by the Syrians to develop the CBM dimension so necessary for creating a positive negotiating atmosphere. On the contrary, Israelis remained concerned at Syria's policy of operating terrorist organizations in Lebanon by "remote control," and by its attempts to undermine moves in the Arab world towards normalization with Israel. Moreover, the Syrian regime was seen as not doing nearly enough to prepare public opinion at home for a possible peace with Israel.

Complicating matters further, negotiations between Israel and Syria were intermittent and dogged by extreme caution. Throughout, Syria exhibited "strategic steadfastness" - which, in practice, meant waiting for flexibility on the Israeli side. For its part, Israel refused to clarify its position on withdrawal from the Golan Heights, and insisted on a wide-ranging security approach.. Still, at various times

during Rabin's term (August 1993 and November 1994), and when Peres was prime minister (late 1995 and early 1996), there seemed to be progress. But, it was never translated into the basis of an agreement.

The negotiation after Rabin's assassination in November 1995, took place at the Wye Plantation near Washington, with the Syrians under the impression that an eventual Israeli withdrawal from the Golan was the basic premise under which the talks were being held. They therefore agreed to modify their position in a number of areas: normalization; comprehensiveness of the agreement, (that it would mean peace between Israel and all the other Arab states including Lebanon, and that it would not be dependent on any other accord, for example, agreement with the Palestinians); economic issues, (especially a parallel international economic package to facilitate bilateral development and economic cooperation). But there were still deep differences on security issues, where the Syrians favored a limited security regime, both with regard to the area it would cover, and with minimal real or perceived infringements of Syrian sovereignty. The water issue was not dealt with in depth, and there was still sufficient residual vagueness about the Golan withdrawal to make a breakthrough difficult.

Still, the final rounds of negotiation in 1995 and 1996 helped to pinpoint the differences and contributed to a better understanding of each side's positions. Moreover, the nature of the talks was open and businesslike. The lack of progress was partly explained by the fact that the parties were awaiting the results of the Israeli election set for June 1996, in the hope that afterwards the talks would swing into top gear.

But after Netanyahu's election, the opposite occurred, and the talks were suspended. The deadlock was over the point from which negotiations should be resumed, with the Syrians demanding that they be renewed on the basis of understandings already reached, and not from a new starting point. The Israelis argued that understandings reached with the Rabin and Peres governments had never been committed to paper and that the new government was not bound by them.

MAIN STAGES OF THE NEGOTIATIONS

I do not intend in this chapter to attempt a detailed description of the Israel-Syria negotiations since Madrid.(10) But it is important to summarize the main developments so that we can ascertain at what point the talks were broken off, learn from past experience and establish a basis for future dialogue.

It is important to point out that Asad negotiated with no less than three Israeli prime ministers, Shamir, Rabin and Peres, and that Ehud Barak will be the fourth to hold a public dialogue with the Syrian leader. It will therefore be instructive to look at the negotiations from the different personal standpoints of the various leaders, especially on the Israeli side.

The bilateral talks began in Madrid on November 3, 1991, with the first face to face meeting between Israeli and Syrian delegations, albeit in the presence of a third party. The talks went ahead despite a vehement Syrian attack on Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir at the gala opening of the conference, in which Syrian Foreign Minster Farouk Al-Shar'a denigrated Shamir as a "terrorist."

During the Shamir period (November 1991 - 30 April 1992) there were 21 meetings between the delegations. The negotiations were based on the letter of invitation to the Madrid conference by the American and Soviet co-sponsors, who expressed their readiness to help the parties achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace through direct negotiations, based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, and with the ultimate goal of achieving "real peace."

The letter of invitation was backed by American "letters of assurances." In the letter to Israel, the U.S. emphasized concrete elements of peace and security, noting, for example, Israel's right to secure and defensible borders, and reiterating President Ford's 1975 commitment on the Golan Heights, which stated:
"The U.S. will give great weight to Israel's position that any peace agreement with Syria must be predicated on Israel's remaining on the Golan Heights."

In the letter of assurances to Syria, Washington stressed its support for the principle of "land for peace," adding that, in the American view, it applied to the Golan Heights as well. The Americans repeated their opposition to the application of Israeli law on the Golan, and promised to faithfully play the role of honest broker. On the other hand, in his Madrid Conference address, Bush used the term "territorial compromise," which upset the Syrians.

But the talks during Shamir's tenure (until May 1992), got nowhere for several reasons:

a. There were wide gaps in the fundamental views and opening positions of the parties. This was further exacerbated by ill-humored verbal clashes between the negotiating teams.

b. Israel sought primarily to keep up the appearance of negotiations to avert a crisis which might impact negatively on the parallel Jordanian and Palestinian tracks. Shamir's formula was "peace for peace," whereas the Syrians, brandishing Resolution 242, tried to focus the debate on Israeli withdrawal.

c. The Americans kept a very low profile and were happy just to see the talks continuing. The differences were too deep for them to make bridging proposals.

d. The talks were open and well-reported, with the emphasis on form rather than substance.

As the talks evolved, working documents touching on the notion of a peace treaty were exchanged. But the two sides stuck to their basic positions: Syria saw the negotiations as talks about withdrawal, and argued that the pull-back would in itself create a peace dynamic, whereas Israel insisted on first negotiating the terms of peace and normalization in fine detail.

During Rabin's term as prime minister, there were a number of significant developments:

a. Between August 92 and September 93, Israel and Syria tried to draft a joint Declaration of Principles. Israel announced that it accepted in principle that Resolution 242 applied to the Golan, and undertook to detail the extent of the ensuing withdrawal after receiving clarifications from Syria on the nature of the peace. Israel insisted that agreement with Syria not be dependent on other tracks and that its security needs be guaranteed. The Syrians insisted on full withdrawal. In any event, the signing in August 1993 of a Declaration of Principles (D.O.P.) between Israel and the PLO left the Syrian track high and dry with no breakthrough in sight.

b. Between the Spring of 1994 and the Summer of 1995, an intensive mutual effort was made, with American assistance, to break the deadlock. It was during this period that Rabin put forward his "4 legs of the table" theory, that the negotiations should focus and progress simultaneously on four key, inter-related issues.

    1. Security arrangements
    2. Normalization
    3. Borders
    4. Stages of withdrawal

In April 1994, Rabin presented a practical proposal to the Americans. He said he was ready to commit to withdrawal in stages, over a period of a few years, with the first stage a token pullback from the Druze villages on the Golan. The Syrians were urged to respond with commitments of their own, and to start implementing the process of normalization after the first Israeli withdrawal. There were several relevant issues on the normalization and security agendas: Exchange of ambassadors, free movement of tourists, air, sea, trade and cultural links, demilitarization of the entire Golan and beyond (up to the approaches to Damascus),

the creation of further limited forces areas, securing the supply of water to Israel from the Golan, and the prevention of terror from Lebanon.

In the ensuing dialogue, held under American auspices, the Syrians demanded an Israeli commitment to withdraw to the June 4, 1967 lines. According to various reports, Rabin expressed readiness to the Americans to consider withdrawal from the Golan, if Israeli security needs and normalization demands were met. Israeli sources say he was deliberately vague, and expressed his position in terms of a conditional hypothesis for American consumption only. The Americans, however, passed it on to Asad without Rabin's approval. When he learned what had happened, he was furious.

The Syrians argued later that Israel had conveyed its readiness to withdraw to the June 4 lines to the Americans as a kind of deposit (11), which, in fact, made the continuation of negotiations between Israel and Syria possible, and paved the way for the meetings of the chiefs of staff in Washington, as well as the "Non-Paper" drafted by the US and which reflected agreements on security issues.

There were two rounds of talks between the chiefs of staff, the first in December 1994, (Barak-Shihabi), and the second in June 1995 (Shachak-Shihabi). The first ended with the parties deeply divided over security issues, after the Israelis argued for a significant demilitarization as well as an Israeli presence on the Golan. The second meeting also focused on security arrangements, but the atmosphere was better. Shihabi declared that the ratio of demilitarization on both sides of the border would be 10:6 in Israel's favor, which constituted a softening of the Syrian position, after their initial insistence on absolute symmetry in the security arrangements.

It was between these two meetings that the Non-Paper was drafted with American assistance. Entitled "A paper of understandings on the issue of security arrangements," it was made up of two elements: Aims and Principles. The aims were to reduce to a minimum the threat of surprise attack, to prevent daily friction along the border and to minimize the risk of wider conflagration or all-out war.

As to the principles, it was agreed that security of one side would not be at the expense of the other, that the security arrangements would be equal, mutual and reciprocal, and that if, during the negotiations, it became clear that implementation of the equality principle in a specific case was difficult or impossible for topographical reasons, experts from both sides would discuss the problem and solve it. It was also agreed that the arrangements would have to be compatible with the sovereignty and territorial integrity of both sides, and be limited to "relevant areas" on both sides of the border.(12)

In the meantime, staff work on security conducted in Israel interpreted and fleshed out the Non-Paper. The results were summarized in June 1995 in the so-called "Shtauber Document," (named for the Brigadier-General, who headed strategic planning in the IDF's planning division) which, although leaked to the press, reflected an objective, professional and not a political assessment, (it was not meant for publication) and hence its special importance. The "Shtauber Document" was published in its entirety in the Israeli press (Yediot Aharonot, June 29, 1995) and it enumerated the Israeli principles and components of security arrangements as follows:

a. The need for a "package" of security arrangements, which would include a demilitarized buffer zone, limited forces zones, and elements of verification and supervision (including a predominant American element), the aim of which would be to place political obstacles in the way of any decision to advance military forces to the Golan.

b. Any change in one or more of the above components would have to be compensated for by others. The document emphasized that if Israel were to be satisfied on the question of retaining its early warning and intelligence capabilities on the Golan, (by implication through its early warning station on Mount Hermon), it would be able to be more flexible on the question of the limited forces zones. In reference to the Hermon station, the document argued that the IDF must continue to get information that can only be received through its present

Hermon deployment, and that it would necessary to discuss the various possibilities for doing so.

c. The security arrangements must guarantee that there would be no advantage to be gained by the side starting a war over the side defending itself, and allow enough time for Israel to mobilize its reserves. The operative conclusion would be keeping the large concentrations of both armies far apart from each other, or alternatively, or as a supplement, reducing their battle readiness, increasing transparency and creating relations of trust between the armies.

d. Prohibiting hostile military cooperation against one of the parties to the agreement, for example, through hostile military alliances or calling in foreign expeditionary forces.

e. Isolating and withholding aid from elements conducting hostile activities against the other side and/or against the peace process. (The reference is to the terrorist elements to which Syria grants safe haven).

In any event, this paper is the only mutually agreed written document produced by the parties since Madrid. But although it created a basis for discussion, the interpretations given it by the two sides were vastly different. The Syrians preferred to cite mainly to the principles, and less the aims. They argued that the security arrangements were only applicable to the "relevant areas," (that is to two thin and equal strips of land on each side of the 1967 border). Israel, on the other hand, wanted several demilitarized or thinned out strips, deep in Syrian territory.

In general, we can say that during Rabin's tenure, the negotiations with Syria were conducted slowly and cautiously, and that, during this time, Israel made far more progress on other tracks. It signed a peace treaty with Jordan (October 1994), and another interim agreement with the Palestinians (September 1995). Nevertheless:

a. The very fact that channels between Israel and Syria were kept open was important.

b. The Syrians believed they had gained a significant achievement in the shape of an Israeli commitment to withdraw from the Golan.

c. Israel made a gain in principle with the Syrian Chief of Staff's acceptance of the 10:6 ratio in the depth of the demilitarized zones on both sides of the border, which constituted a softening of the initial Syrian demand for absolute symmetry.

d. It was the first time the two countries had been able (with American help) to draft a security non-paper on the basis of which they were able to hold a series of discussions on security arrangements.

THE NEGOTIATIONS DURING PERES'S TERM; DECEMBER '95 - MARCH '96

Between December 95 and March 96, Israeli and Syrian delegations conducted three rounds of negotiations at the Wye Plantation in Maryland. There were bilateral sessions, trilateral sessions with the US, and private meetings between members of the delegations. The Israeli delegation was headed by Foreign Ministry Director General Uri Savir and the Syrian by their Ambassador to Washington, Walid Mu'allim. Dennis Ross co-ordinated the American team.

The focus was on a new approach that the Israelis put to the Syrians. (13) They presented a new, extensive Peres-inspired package, which deviated from the old land for peace framework. It was designed to inject an element of potential profit for both Israel and Syria, which would result from a convergence of bilateral interests, through regional arrangements and an international aid package.

The new Israeli ideas meant raising the American profile, holding the talks in Washington for longer periods and adding new elements to Rabin's "four legs of the table." The main additions were the comprehensiveness and regional nature of the agreement, the international package to underpin it, the focus on economic development, the search for a regional solution to the water issue, and having the solutions to each problem spread over a time axis.

There were signs of progress on a number of key issues:

a. **Normalization** - the Syrians were ready to make progress on 12 of the 18 areas of normalization proposed by Israel, including postal, air, trade and investment links, and the opening of embassies. But they shied away from anything that might involve an active development of ties, for example cultural and agricultural ties, arguing that they had no such agreements with any other state.

b. **Comprehensiveness of the agreement** - the Israelis maintained that an Israeli - Syrian peace should be part of a comprehensive regional arrangement, heralding the end of the Israeli-Arab conflict (and, of course, the end of Israel's conflict with Lebanon), and that it should not be dependent on other agreements, such as permanent settlement with the Palestinians. The Syrians endorsed this position, and expressed satisfaction at the recognition of Syria's pivotal role in the Arab world.

c. **The regional system** - for the first time in the long history of negotiations between them, the parties exchanged views on the regional system and common regional interests, like the containment of fundamentalism. The Syrians promised to help advance Israel's relations with the Arab world.

d. **International aid package** - Israel urged that the two countries work together for an international package which would include bilateral

and multilateral projects for developing the Golan Heights, as well as foreign aid for Syria, including debt waiving, with the Americans slated to lead the international effort. Indeed, the Americans started promoting the international economic effort as part of an international commitment to the prosperity of the countries of the region.

e. **Water** - The problem was dealt with in a very general way, and it was agreed that the U.S. would raise the issue with other parties in the region, mainly Turkey, on the assumption that they should seek ways to meet both Israeli and Syrian needs. The initial feelers drew strong reservations in Ankara, with the Turks coming out strongly against any linkage between the dispute over the waters of the Euphrates and peace in the Middle East. The Turkish Foreign Ministry even released a statement to the effect that no contribution to peace in the Middle East could come at Turkey's expense, and that "the waters of the Euphrates are not up for discussion in the peace process."(14) Today, however, things have changed, and the Turkish attitude to the problem of water in the regional context is more positive.

f. The question of borders and withdrawal was not discussed in the talks although the Syrians asserted that in their view the talks were being held under the working hypothesis of a full Israeli withdrawal. Ambassador Mu'allim even claimed later that "Rabin's commitment to a full Israeli withdrawal was confirmed by Peres."(15)

During the Wye talks a businesslike discussion on a range of security issues was launched. The negotiating teams included senior officers, with the focus of the debate on the "relevant areas," as defined in the 1995 non-paper. The Syrians argued that their view of the concept meant limited demilitarized zones on both sides of the border and limited forces zones (in the Kuneitra and Sefad areas only). They sought to marginalize the security arrangements, and stressed the notions of equality

and symmetry. Their main message was "peace is security." Israel, as in the past, argued for far more extensive limited forces areas. There was an agreement in principle on a demilitarized zone, with only policemen and no military personnel, and a deeper limited forces zone in which the deployment of armed forces would be restricted. Israel proposed adding a "third zone," in which the offensive capacities of the armies would be limited, but the Syrians ignored this. The Syrian press complained that Israel was "exaggerating" its security concerns for domestic reasons, and ignoring its nuclear capability.(16)

Both delegations also conducted negotiations with the Americans, in which the Syrians expressed their desire for improved ties with Washington, and for future American economic and military assistance. In parallel, Israel and the U.S. conducted initial talks on raising the level of strategic cooperation between them, in the context of an Israel- Syria peace, and the Israeli side made clear its expectation of extensive American aid. The talks, however, were broken off in March 1996 after a string of terrorist attacks in Israel, and were not resumed after the Israeli elections in May that year. Since then, there have been no substantive negotiations between Israel and Syria.

DEVELOPMENTS SINCE WYE AND THE ARGUMENT OVER THE POINT AT WHICH THE NEGOTIATIONS WERE STOPPED

Netanyahu's victory in May 1996, and the emergence of a right wing government in Israel created a new situation with regard to the political process with Syria. The Netanyahu government maintained that Israel was not committed to past understandings, promises, summaries or interpretations. According to press reports, Israel even managed to get a letter from Secretary of State Christopher (at the start of 1997), in which he confirmed Israel's claim that the Non-Paper was not binding by international law. These reports took the Syrians by surprise, and evoked an angry Syrian response.

Given the deep differences between Israel and Syria, the Syrians made an uncharacteristically strenuous effort to present their view of the point at which the

talks were broken off to get international backing for their position. In a series of interviews between 1996 and 1998, by Asad, Al-Shara, and Mu'allim, the following points were stressed:

a. Progress was achieved in the talks, including on the question of normalization, and that had practical significance for any resumption of the talks.

b. Israel's commitments and agreements were official and binding, and there could be no going back on them.

c. Israel's main commitment - for a full withdrawal (to the June 4, 1967 lines) - was "deposited" with the U.S. The commitment was made twice: First by Rabin, and afterwards confirmed by Peres.

d. The talks at the Wye plantation were held under a mechanism of writing down agreements between the parties, getting them confirmed by the leaders and making them known to the Americans in the course of the dialogue.

e. The Non-Paper of May 1995 on security arrangements was valid and binding.

f. Syria was not to blame for missing an historic opportunity for a breakthrough. Syria had sought an agreement within a relatively short, but achievable, time frame (the target date was September 1996). But the talks ran into difficulty because of Israeli Prime Minister Peres's insistence on calling elections,(17) and because of Israel's exaggerated normalization and security demands, (for example early warning stations on the Golan.)

g. Active involvement of the United States is important now to renew the talks and to bridge the gaps once they get underway.

h. Syria will not go back on its basic positions, first and foremost, withdrawal to the June 4 lines. The Syrians repeated their argument that the area between the international border of 1923 and the June 4 lines was negligible and devoid of any strategic significance for Israel, whereas for Syria it entailed the principle of sovereignty "over every meter of its land."(18)

i. Insistence on the linkage between the Syrian and Lebanese tracks. Syria continued to see comprehensive peace in terms of Syria and Lebanon together making peace with Israel. During the past two years, the Syrians took action to head off Israeli proposals for a "Lebanon first approach."

j. Syria opposes secret talks or talks at the top leadership level.

The Syrians seem to have held out some hope that the Likud government would be able to create a domestic consensus in Israel for peace moves that would entail an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. Thus, Mu'allim expressed the hope after the Hebron accord with the Palestinians in January 1997, that Netanyahu, as the leader of the right, might be able to get wide support in Israel for an agreement with Syria. As time went by, however, the Syrian refrain grew increasingly pessimistic, and their comments on the Netanyahu government increasingly acrimonious.

After his election defeat in May 1999, Netanyahu confirmed press reports on secret contacts between Israel and Syria during his term, which, according to him, "did not bear fruit because of differences over withdrawal from the Golan Heights and where the permanent border line would run." Netanyahu hinted that the contacts, which were conducted through the Omanis, European envoy Moratinos and "private" mediators, produced gains for Israel, especially in the security package. According to Netanyahu, the Syrians had agreed to Israeli teams manning the early warning station on the Hermon for a few years. The press in Israel quoted Israeli sources to the effect

that Netanyahu had agreed to a significant withdrawal, but had refused to outline its exact dimensions.(19)

AT WHAT POINT WERE THE NEGOTIATIONS STOPPED?

Syrian Foreign Minister Al-Shara declared in April 1999 that during the Labor government's term, there were clear signs of progress, with the U.S. help, on the question of full Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 lines, and on the security Non-Paper. That, Al-Shar'a claimed, "constituted 80 percent of a peace treaty."(20)

It is safe to assume that Al-Shar'a's comments, released on the eve of elections in Israel, reflected hope for a change in government in Israel, which might lead to a change in Israel's negotiating position. I believe the intention was to signal to a new government that the Syrian track was ripe, and that it would be better to deal with it early - that is, give it precedence over the Palestinian track.

The course of the negotiations as described above can give a pretty accurate picture of the point at which the talks were broken off. I would not go as far as to say that 80 percent of an agreement had been wrapped up; but I believe the parties had indeed made significant progress, and, with hard work and a creative touch, it would have been possible to conclude a signed peace treaty within a relatively short space of time. Still, it is clear that significant differences remained on substantive issues; above all, on the border and the security arrangements.

The main understandings between Israel and Syria can be summarized as follows:

a. **Withdrawal** - the Syrians understood that Israel had committed itself to a significant withdrawal, but not to a specific line, and that this readiness was subject to its demands on security and the nature of peace being met. In an appearance before the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in August 1994, I said that if I were the Syrian head of intelligence I would infer from Israeli statements

that Israel understood the imperative of giving up the Golan in return for acceptance of its demands on security, water, and normalization.

b. **Normalization** - Syria accepted most of the normalization categories raised by Israel, including full diplomatic relations, resident ambassadors, economic cooperation, trade, transport and tourism. But there was no agreement on cultural exchanges, health or agriculture, and the Syrians intimated that they would prefer to minimize references to normalization in the peace treaty itself. For Syria, the preferred terminology was "normal peace relations," the main elements of which are mutual recognition, agreed borders and diplomatic relations. In an interview with a-Safir (November 1995) Foreign Minister a-Sha'ara said "we don't like the term normalization, and prefer to use the phrase normal peace relations."

c. **Comprehensiveness of the agreement** - Israel and Syria agreed on the overall concept, the main points of which were that an accord with Syria would include a peace treaty with Lebanon; that it would be independent of any other agreements; that it would be accompanied by regional reconciliation; and that it would have an extensive economic dimension based on regional cooperation.

d. **The international economic package** - Israel and Syria agreed on American leadership of a move in which governments and the private sector would promote regional and bilateral projects under the heading "Economic Partnership for Peace." The Americans got Saudi agreement in principle to back this effort.

e. **Security arrangements** - the Non-Paper of May 1995 heralded the beginning of a structured debate on the various security issues, focusing on demilitarized and limited forces zones, and facilitating a mapping of the differences, with each side presenting its approach and needs in a frank and businesslike manner.

But residual differences between the parties should not be underestimated:

a. **The extent of the withdrawal** - Israel is not prepared to withdraw to the June 4, 1967 lines, because it believes there is a good legal case for the international border of 1923. Agreement on the border is obviously one of the keys to a deal. (21) Asad's Syria, however, may well continue to insist on a greater territorial return than Egypt got, if only to justify the 20 year-long delay after the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

b. **Security arrangements** - the parties have not yet engaged in detailed discussions, and the differences are still wide, especially over the depth of the "relevant areas." The Syrians argue that "peace provides security" since it destroys the roots of conflict, and they thereby seek to minimize the significance of the security regime. Israel, on the contrary, argues that nurturing Israel - Syria ties will take time, and that deep and stable security arrangements to prevent surprise attack or war are necessary, as stated in the Non-Paper's aims. Israel seeks a peace time limitation of forces, a distancing of offensive units (armor divisions) from the border areas, backed up by reliable monitoring and early warning systems.

c. **The water issue** - Israel, arguing that water has existential significance, seeks practical arrangements based on current usage, while the Syrians will certainly seek to control the water sources. Discussions on a water regime and allocations remain to be concluded.

d. **The Lebanese problem** - Israel and Syria have yet to discuss this issue in depth, but it contains seeds of potential friction. There could be a clash between Israel's interest in conducting negotiations in a positive atmosphere without terror attacks from

Lebanon and Syria's role in Lebanon and perceived responsibility for maintaining peace and stability there. My conclusion is that in peacetime, however, the Syrian presence in Lebanon gives Israel a strategic advantage, if only from the point of view of preventing terror.

e. **The nature of the peace** - the Syrians still see peace as a situation in which Israel is cut down to its "natural size," with limited bilateral relations between the two countries, and Israel prevented from using the peace to establish a position of regional superiority.

f. Israel's strategic power constitutes a problem for Syria and the Syrians are likely to raise the issue (even as messengers for Egypt) as a subject for discussion and to demand that Israel dismantle its alleged nuclear capability, which they believe gives it regional supremacy. I do not, however, think that demand, if it is made, will be a deal-breaker, assuming the Syrians are satisfied on the Golan issue.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND LESSONS OF THE NEGOTIATIONS

In October 1994, in a speech to the Knesset, Israel's then Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, outlined his conception of peace with Syria and the future of the Israeli settlement on the Golan. He promised that he would submit any agreement with the Syrians to a referendum, and, it seems to me in retrospect, that this speech accurately reflects Rabin's Golan legacy. This is what he said:

"As long as Syria refused to recognize Israel's right to exist and live in peace there was no room for dialogue. As long as Damascus rejected our hand extended in friendship, we continued to strengthen our military and civilian hold on the Golan Heights, a few dozen kilometers from Damascus... But there are signs of change that point to Syria's readiness to be a partner in a journey to peace. The road is still long, there is still a lot of work to do, peace with Syria is still distant. But we have

no intention of ignoring the signs. We will not go back to the days of 'there is no one to talk to;' we won't go back to the days of 'we are waiting for a phone call;' we are going forward!"(22)

As for the Syrians, in the years preceding negotiations and in the years of stalemate too, the leadership took pains to point out that for Syria peace was a "strategic choice," and kept channels of communication with Israel open. In early 1996 (at the breaking of the fast towards the end of the Ramadan), Asad declared: "The peace process has not advanced so far, but we in Syria will continue to favor peace, no matter how difficult the conditions ... we want to establish friendship with all people on the basis of our national interests and our rights."(23)

I believe we can sum up the significance of the negotiations that have been conducted up till now on an optimistic note:

a. Both parties have a basic interest in taking the negotiations forward, and today do not see any option other than continuing the process. The probability of an attempted Syrian land-grab on the Golan is low, because in my view Asad won't chance an operation that could escalate and lead to all out war, the consequences of which for Syria would be disastrous.

b. The convergence of interests between Israel and Syria on the time axis is growing, which means an increasing awareness that delaying tactics serve neither side.

    1. From Israel's point of view, peace with Syria entails a solution of its difficulties in the Lebanese theater as well, enabling an orderly withdrawal from Lebanon and guaranteeing the safety of its northern towns and villages. It would also promote its relations with all Arab states, and strengthen its position on the Palestinian track in the permanent status negotiations.

2. From Syrian's point of view, peace would achieve the following key goals: return of the Golan, elevation of national pride and prestige, end of isolation, improved ties with the U.S. and de jure control in Lebanon. Moreover, Syria has a clear interest in achieving a peace treaty with Israel *before* the permanent settlement of the Palestinian problem, and it needs the economic fruits of peace as soon as it can get them, given its growing economic difficulties.

3. The U.S. elections in November 2000 and their impact on the American administration's ability to devote energy and provide incentives for the process might create time pressure on the parties. President Clinton exudes eager anticipation and readiness to contribute toward bringing about a breakthrough, but there is no doubt that this time he expects the parties to take into consideration the fact that the political time-clock for him to go down in history as the man who brought about the Israeli-Syrian peace is winding down. Barak, too, has set a target date for progress in the negotiations within 15 months - a timetable that conforms with and is in fact drawn from the American election timetable. Israel, at least recognizes the need to adapt the negotiating timetable to Clinton's political timetable. It seems that the Syrians understand this too.

c. Both sides have a clear idea of the contours of the solution and a list of issues that require further attention. In general terms, the equations "land for peace" or "land for security" are acceptable to both. It is clear they are ready to proceed not out of love, but because of interests and policy considerations that have evolved against a background of global and regional change. In other words, we are talking about marriage between mature adults, who, given past scars, insist on a financial guarantee against an early divorce.

d. Neither side wants to be blamed for missing the chance for peace. The new circumstances created after the elections in Israel provide a "second chance" for the process, with an effort to learn from past negotiations, to better understand the sensitivities of the other side and to avoid past mistakes.

In this context, the following should be stressed:

a. Despite their differences, the parties managed to conduct negotiations in a positive, informal and sometimes even friendly atmosphere. This is particularly true of the negotiations at Wye in 1995-96, in which politicians and senior army personnel from both sides frankly discussed the most sensitive issues on the agenda. Looking to the future, it is clear that a positive atmosphere, mutual respect, and understanding for each other's interests will affect the negotiating teams' ability to take the dialogue forward.

b. It is important to preserve the secrecy of the discussions and to prevent leaks, which could make things difficult for the negotiators, given their respective domestic pressures.

c. Both sides recognize today that peace must also be based on the convergence of basic strategic interests, such as regional stability and opening up the region economically, a process from which both stand to benefit in a win-win situation. Breaking the hold of the zero-sum game mentality, in which one side's gain is seen by the other as its inevitable loss, is essential if the desired breakthrough is to be made.

d. The more each side recognizes the others justifiable feelings and sensitivities, the easier it will be to assuage mutual fears and anxieties. For example:

1. It is important that Israel recognizes Syrian concerns in the security package and understands that Syria sees Israel as a serious threat. The Syrians complained that in previous sessions Israel based its proposals for security arrangements on the Golan exclusively on its own concept of security, which has Israel's security at the center, points at Syria's ostensible aggressive intentions and emphasizes potential dangers to Israel. But it is important that Israel understands and internalizes Syria's security anxieties as well. Syrian researchers argue that the Israeli threat to Syria is acute, since one third of the Syrian population, a number equal to the entire population of Israel, lives in the Damascus area, 40 kilometers from the border. Furthermore, three quarters of the Syrian population is concentrated in urban areas between Damascus and Haleb, a territory no bigger than Israel. Syria also sees itself as a victim of aggression and of Israel's military supremacy. According to the Syrians, backed up by quotes from Israeli military men and academics, Israel was the aggressor in all the wars. They argue that this was the case too in the years immediately after the 1949 armistice, which were saturated with border incidents.(24)

2. A change in Israel's policy of all-embracing normalization should be considered. It would not necessarily produce gains for Israel or its economy, and it creates anxieties on the other side. Moreover, there is a genuine difficulty in bridging all the gaps at once. Peace is signed between leaders and states, but its social internalization takes much longer.

3. As for Syria, it must internalize the fact that it is facing a limited "window of opportunity" and must take brave

decisions, not only on its strategic readiness to go along the peace road, but on practical steps to convince the Israeli people of the sincerity of its intentions and that the price of peace is worth paying. This means accelerating the decision-making process in Syria, as well as gestures and confidence building measures that will make a strong impression on the Israelis. In this context, one need only recall the psychological breakthrough effected by Egyptian President Sadat's visit to Israel in 1977. The Syrians should show greater flexibility on security issues, and display a readiness to take practical steps to guarantee Israeli interests, for example, on the question of water.

e. The importance of the Lebanese question - previous negotiations were conducted under the shadow of terror and army operations in Lebanon. Continuation of the state of tension in Lebanon will place a heavy burden on the negotiations and could lead to their collapse. But since an agreement with Lebanon would be a consequence of a deal with Syria, any "Lebanon first" notion makes sense only as an initial stage in the implementation of a comprehensive agreement. I think it might be possible to discuss implementation of a "Lebanon first" deal, once an agreement in principle is reached on Israeli recognition of the Syrian presence in Lebanon, assuming Israel concludes that this presence contributes to stability. The operative significance of this is that with the renewal of negotiations, it is important that the parties begin a dialogue on the Lebanon issue, and that Syria uses its influence on the Hizballah and Iran to facilitate peace talks without tensions and crises. This will be a real test whether the Syrians are capable of giving up their belief that military pressure in the field on Israel will force it to soften its stand in the peace talks. A period of quiet in Lebanon is essential (even if only temporary) to enable meaningful negotiations between Israel and Syria.

f. The role of the US - a condition for every agreement between Israel and its neighbors has been the conduct of direct negotiations. One of the mistakes the Arab states used to make was to wait for political pressure to be exerted on Israel, in anticipation of a solution imposed from the outside. It seems that now both Israel and the Arabs have matured in this respect. Israel realizes that the weight of decision rests on its shoulders, whereas to the Arabs, and in particular Syria, it is clear that they cannot expect the Americans to do the job for them or a deep crisis to occur between Israel and the U.S. over Israel's standing firm on its vital interests.

g. Therefore, both sides now see the U.S. as a facilitator and mediator, able to bridge existing gaps and to provide any agreement they reach with security and economic underpinning. Syria and Israel can be likened to two paratroopers, sitting in an American plane, and jumping from it into a new world, into the open air, with two American parachutes spread above them. From this point of view, the "American role" actually gains in importance, and its input becomes even more critical than before. And it is to a more detailed analysis of this enhanced American role that we now turn.

CHAPTER THREE
THE UNITED STATES AND THE ISRAELI-SYRIAN DIALOGUE

GENERAL

American involvement in Israeli-Syrian negotiations since Madrid has been essential for progress. It was the Americans who made the Madrid Conference possible and who later mediated the May 1995 security Non-Paper. Most of the meetings between the parties took place in Washington; senior Administration officials and American Secretaries of State undertook dozens of shuttle missions between Jerusalem and Damascus. During the negotiations, the Americans relayed messages, raised questions on the issues under negotiation, and even expressed readiness to play a role in monitoring the agreement and in strengthening its components through economic aid to the parties. The Americans also signaled to both Israel and Syria that, on the bilateral level, the agreement would have positive implications for their relations with the U.S.

Looking at American regional interests, it is clear that an Israeli-Syrian peace accord would be a major achievement. It could contribute to the weakening and isolation of the radical Arab-Moslem states (Iran and Iraq), promote regional stability, bring a lull to the Lebanese theater and reduce terror. It would also strengthen the American position in the regional periphery, with the emphasis on the Gulf.

It is important to stress that despite the American aid and close involvement in the negotiations, Washington never once deviated from its mediating role and always worked at a pace and in a style dictated by the parties themselves. The U.S. never saw itself bound by tight time frames. With the Golan front quiet since 1973, Israel often gave priority to other tracks; Syria, never overly eager for a breakthrough, often acted against America's regional interests. (Terror, proliferation, Iraq, Lebanon).

It seems to me, that in order to achieve more significant negotiating results, the Americans will have to undertake more intensive and substantive involvement, including at the highest (presidential) level. This would entail taking an active part in determining the contours of agreement on various issues, creating the links between them, implementing the security arrangements and creating a new set of relations with both countries that would help reinforce the deal between them.

I have no doubt that the agreement between Israel and Syria will stand or fall on the Syria-Israel-U.S. triangle. However, it is important to point out that other international players may seek a place in the negotiating picture, and even attempt to help where they believe they can. France, for example, has a traditional interest in the Levant and is a member of the committee monitoring the 1996 Grapes of Wrath understandings between Israel, Lebanon and the Hezbollah. The European Union is developing an independent common foreign policy and has a view on the Golan issue. The economic aspects of future Syrian and Golan development might interest the Europeans. The Russians too have long-standing relations with Syria, and could play a role in some aspects of the process, including, for example, in an international force on the Golan, if the parties agree to station one there. That said, I still believe President Clinton is the key figure for future negotiations, with the decisive factor his desire to crown his second term with a diplomatic success that will help him leave his mark on history as a statesman, and help eradicate some of the previous damage to his image.

In this chapter, I will touch on things the U.S. can do to help the parties in the Israel-Syrian dialogue move forward.

ISRAELI EXPECTATIONS FROM THE UNITED STATES

Coordination and prior understanding with the United States has always been the cornerstone of Israel's negotiations on the various Middle Eastern tracks. Israel believes agreements with the Arab world must be accompanied by a system of supportive American relations, designed to stabilize the agreement and to strengthen the traditional ties between the two countries. Israel needs the United States to balance

and finance the security risks involved in conceding strategic and territorial assets. In fact, maintaining and strengthening Israel's special relationship with Washington, which has no equal in the Middle East, are an important card the Americans could use to influence the decision-making process in Israel too.

A thawing in Syria-U.S. relations would not necessarily run counter to Israel's interests, as long as the U.S. finds the correct balance between its encouragement of Syrian flexibility by putting bilateral incentives on the table and giving Damascus significant achievements before it carries out its part in the negotiations. Israel and the U.S. will have to hold a preliminary dialogue on this.

Israel would like to see the U.S. playing a role on a number of issues. For example:

a. To help get flexibility in the Syrian position on security arrangements on the Golan, including demilitarization, depth of the "relevant areas," and limitations on offensive forces deployed near these areas.

b. To back, at the very least, Israel's minimum demands on normalization, the trappings of peace and diplomatic relations, and having them implemented before the IDF's final withdrawal from the Golan.

c. To strengthen the comprehensive dimension of the peace by creating the conditions for the opening of peace negotiations with Lebanon, and by taking action to promote reconciliation between Israel and the entire Arab world.

d. To put together an extensive international aid package that would promote bilateral (Israeli - Syrian) and regional projects for the benefit of both parties. On this, the Americans will have domestic constraints, expressed through the attitude of Congress; there would also be Syrian constraints stemming from a fear of western

economic penetration; and problems of funding can be expected. In other words, the parties' expectations of economic aid may turn out to be beyond the U.S.'s capacity to come up with the funds, and American action vis a vis Europe and Japan may be necessary to get them to join the international effort.

e. To channel the discussions on water to practical solutions based on the needs of the parties to retain existing allocations, while promoting projects that would enable Israel to overcome shortages, for example through internationally financed desalination plants. This is a subject that properly belongs to the category of national security, and which has major strategic significance.

f. To help in finding an agreed formula on the deepest differences, with the border issue at the top of the list.

g. To play a role in verification and supervision of the agreement, and in preventing violations, including the possibility of an American military presence on the Golan, mainly to resolve the question of early warning.

h. To insist on the severing of all connections between Syria and the terror organizations, in Lebanon as well, as a clear condition for Syria's "legitimation" in the international arena, and for Israel's agreement on wider cooperation between Syria and the U.S., in all aspects.

i. An American commitment to enable Israel to maintain its strategic defensive capability, and to protect it from demands, Syrian or other, to reveal or undermine that capability.

Over and above all this, Israel will have a clear interest in bringing about a "qualitative leap" in the upgrading of its strategic relationship with the U.S. Israel will probably seek understandings with the U.S. in the following areas:

a. Understandings and commitments pertaining to the peace agreement with Syria and Lebanon, including American guarantees of Israel's territorial integrity within the new borders; sanctions against Syria if it violates the agreement; civilian aid to finance or at least ease the burden of the cost of withdrawal; a military aid package in compensation for giving up the Golan and the lost strategic advantage that would entail.

b. Commitments pertaining to strategic cooperation between Israel and the U.S. including maintaining Israel's qualitative technological edge vis a vis any potential Arab coalition; maintaining and strengthening Israel's intelligence capacity, especially in the realm of early warning; and cooperation in civil defense against missiles and unconventional weapons' threats.

If it is decided to station an international force on the Golan to keep the peace, Israel will have a clear interest in the American component of that force being central, in order to deter violations and ensure the stability of the force for whatever period the agreement stipulates.

SYRIAN EXPECTATIONS FROM THE UNITED STATES

Syria sees in the agreement with Israel not only fulfillment of its aim to retrieve the Golan Heights, but as a central anchor in:

a. Building the foundations for a new and more meaningful, qualitative relationship with the US, which will bring in its wake an improvement in Syria's international image and status.

b. Strengthening the American interest in preserving the Asad administration, as a pragmatic secular regime that could serve American interests in the Middle East.

c. Strengthening Syria's economy by attracting foreign investment and developing infrastructure.

d. Providing aid to the Syrian army, which is in need of modernization.

But, after almost a decade of negotiations between Israel and Syria, there has been no significant progress in Damascus's relations with Washington, with the Americans still deeply suspicious of the Asad regime. It seems that for various reasons, including recognition of domestic constraints, the U.S. will prefer to hold back the rewards it intends to provide Syria to the later stages of the process, as bait or compensation for the Syrians, that might lead to a breakthrough in the negotiations.

At this point, at least, the Americans are legally bound to oppose any arms deals with Syria, given its definition as a terror-supporting state. It was in this light that the Americans opposed the recently projected Russian arms deals with Syria. But in conditions of peace and after the removal of Syria from the list of terror-supporting states, the Americans will no longer be able to oppose such deals, and it is reasonable to suppose that a new of set of relations will develop between Washington and Damascus.

In public, the Syrians pretend they don't have great expectations of direct American aid. They want to avoid giving the impression that they can be bought. But my assumption is that as the negotiations progress, the Syrians will seek economic and military incentives from the Americans to balance what they see as asymmetry in American aid to Israel, which could help it achieve regional hegemony at the expense of Syria and the Arab world.

At present, I do not believe there is any mature and systematic Syrian thinking about the rewards Syria could get or demand from the United States. But it

must be clear to the Syrians that such rewards would be forthcoming if there is a genuine sense in the American administration, in Israel and among American Jewry that the Syrian military threat to Israel has been removed.

This feeling could be created, for example, if the security arrangements between Israel and Syria are deep enough, and if in peace-time Syrian offensive forces are deployed at significant distances from the border with Israel. It is clear that only a complete severance of Syria's ties with the terrorist organizations, including Hizballah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and perhaps also a cooling of ties with Iran, would enable the development of American good-will.

In the event of progress towards a peace agreement, and especially once it is signed, a string of American rewards to Syria may become possible. For example:

a. Encouragement of investment by the private-business sector in the Syrian economy.

b. Giving a green light to international financial institutions, like the IMF, to provide credit and technical assistance to Syria.

c. Removal of Syria from the list of states that support terror.

d. Technical and economic aid from the United States for investment in infrastructure - oil, gases, water, electricity, banking and tourism.

e. Assistance in waiving Syria's debt to a number of key countries on the international stage, including Russia, Germany and Japan.

f. Recognition of Syria's role and status in Lebanon.

g. A guarantee that the U.S. will not support regional pacts aimed against Damascus, with the emphasis on what is perceived by Syria as a strategic alliance between Israel and Turkey.

h. Development of basic military ties, perhaps as part of the action around the American forces stationed on the Golan. For example, mutual visits by army personnel, invitation of military observers to maneuvers, and intelligence cooperation to prevent terror.

If the agreement between Israel and Syria is kept and relations between them evolve in a positive way, and if Syria severs its ties with the radicals, it seems to me that Damascus can expect an upgrading of its relations with the U.S. The American quid pro quo would have to be coordinated with Israel and subject to Israeli approval, after joint assessment of Syrian intentions.

THE AMERICAN POSITION

The Americans throughout the past few years have shown an interest in renewing negotiations between Syria and Israel. After the elections in Israel in May 1999, Administration officials expressed the hope that conditions might now be ripe for taking the negotiations forward. The predominant messages expressed by the Americans today are:

a. The questions at issue - including the Golan Heights - are difficult and complex, and will necessitate tough decisions by both sides.

b. It is hard to believe that without American involvement in the negotiations, the parties will be able to make progress. It might be easier for them to take tough decisions if America's consistent support for the process is clear.

c. The United States should not impose solutions on the parties. Its traditional role is to facilitate and to play the role of honest broker. It is up to the parties themselves to reach agreement.

d. The "window of opportunity" on the negotiating track will be open at least until the American presidential elections in November 2000.

e. Serious negotiations must include secret channels.

f. An agreement will produce a positive change in Syrian-U.S. relations.

g. The U.S. will be ready to provide security guarantees, and will raise its own proposals in the negotiations, because vital U.S. interests are at stake, which affect the entire region.

My assumption is that the Americans are indeed true to their word and ready to invest much energy in promoting the Israeli-Syrian negotiations, which, they believe, might lead to security arrangements in Lebanon and reduce the danger of regional friction and escalation. But before they undertake intensive diplomatic moves, including direct presidential involvement, the parties themselves will have to prove the seriousness of their intentions. It seems to me that the days of an American Secretary of State going to Damascus 25 times (a fact which incurred harsh criticism of the administration) without results are over. The "moment of truth" for Israel and Syria has arrived.

CHAPTER FOUR

BARAK vs. ASAD – PERSONALITIES vs. PROCESSES

To be a leader, in essence, means knowing how to take decisions and how to influence people. It also means knowing how to point a nation in the direction that will best serve its interests. It was Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, who said: "It's not important what the people want; it's important what they need."

The role of leaders in the stormy political history of the 20th century has been definitive. There are leaders who have shaped historical processes, but there have often been instances where leaders have found themselves being dragged along by developments, unable to control them. Leadership style and vision -- both in times of relative calm as well as during crises -- has had profound implications for the future of nations and their regional and global environments.

Of the prominent leaders in the Middle East, it was Egyptian President Anwar Sadat who, in 1977, was the first to act on the phrase "Peace of the Brave," (coined by General de Gaulle in Algeria), -- an act which cost him his life. The Israeli Prime Minister at the time, Menachem Begin, had the emotional fortitude to overcome his deep-seated ideological beliefs and to recognize the historical opportunity being presented to his people. The result was the opening of a new era in the Middle East and a breaching of the barriers of hatred and hostility. This process continued, and proved its durability, even after these leaders left the political stage.

In reality, the Israel-Egypt peace treaty led to the end of large-scale wars in the Middle East. It was Mikhael Gorbachev, another leader of historical dimensions, who was responsible for one of the greatest turning points in the 20th century, who in April 1987 urged President Asad in Moscow to start developing his country's economic and human resources and to stop wasting billions on weapons in a fruitless attempt to gain strategic parity with Israel.

Some leaders in the region correctly understood the global changes taking place and the pointlessness of focusing on security, especially at a time when their economies were in trouble. Besides facing demographic threats and other social problems, they were also beset by a shortage of jobs and dwindling resources (for example, water). Leaders who came to this realization included the late King Hussein of Jordan, Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, the late King Hassan of Morocco, as well as the leaders of Israel. The result: The political leadership in these countries opted for promoting the diplomatic process, and for abandoning conflict and confrontation for peace and reconciliation.

For many leaders in the region today, peace, more than ever, like military, economic and technological strength, have all become means to the same end -- fortifying their country's resilience.

Nevertheless, the "breakthrough to peace" is yet to be completed. Regional leaders are today facing formidable challenges, both on the Israel-Syria-Lebanon front and on the Israel-Palestinian track, in formulating final settlements on a series of highly sensitive and complicated issues.

The cardinal question with regard to the Israel-Syria track is whether Prime Minister Barak and President Asad can carry their nations forward, convincing them of the wisdom of reaching an agreement, rather then getting mired in the acrimony of the past. Both leaders now face the onerous challenge of forging a strategy for ongoing, determined negotiations, of convincing their people of the necessity of peace, and of shaping a new culture of coexistence in the dynamic environment of the region. This is doubtless the greatest leadership challenge they will face.

Still, every diplomatic move -- especially those that require daring and involve an element of the unknown -- is fraught with risks. Yet, in my view, a comprehensive Syria-Israel settlement carries with it the real chance for change, the opportunity for both countries to develop and progress side-by-side and to bring the fruits of peace to their peoples and to the region. Both Barak and Asad want to go

down in history as brave leaders who were the architects of peace in the region. The fact that both of them have increasingly been using the term "Peace of the Brave," bears testimony to this desire. Moreover, their wishes correspond with President Clinton's, and therefore there is reason to believe that the chances for peace between Israel and Syria today are good compared to any time in the past.

ISRAEL'S PRIME MINISTER EHUD BARAK

Ehud Barak forged his way to the premiership with characteristic determination and a carefully crafted campaign. The 57-year-old Barak served in a wide range of posts in the Israel Defense Forces -- both as a fighter and commander of elite units that specialized in operations behind enemy lines, as well as in senior posts in the general staff, such as head of planning, head of intelligence, deputy chief of staff, and finally chief of staff, a post he was appointed to in 1992. His many years in the army and the fact that he worked closely with several prime ministers, have contributed to his considerable experience and to his ability to view processes in an integrative fashion, taking into account security, diplomatic and economic issues. His stint as foreign minister (November 1995 to June 1996) provided him with important diplomatic experience and his term as head of the opposition from 1996 to 1999 enabled him to deepen his knowledge of the domestic political scene and to better acquaint himself with the various strata of Israel's heterogeneous society. All this has contributed to Barak's image as a balanced, trustworthy leader with a vision and the capacity to implement it.

Barak is intimately acquainted with the issues that will be on the table in negotiations with Syrian. As IDF intelligence chief in the 1980s, he studied the Syrian issue in depth. During the early 1990s, Barak was intensively involved in the defense establishment's assessments and thinking with regard to the Golan Heights, and in 1994 he became the first IDF chief of staff to meet with his Syrian counterpart -- Hikmat Shihabi -- and to discuss security arrangements between the two countries. Later, in 1995, when Barak was serving as foreign minister, the Director of the Ministry and Head of the Israeli delegation to the Wye Plantation talks, Uri Savir, noted that "Barak made a constructive and creative contribution to the establishment

of a model for a future peace with Syria. During the talks I consulted with him every night by telephone... later Barak also expressed critical views with regard to the Syrians and they reacted angrily."

It is necessary at this juncture to expand on the issue of Barak's diplomatic and security worldview and his understanding of the link between peace and security in the Middle East. What stands out in Barak's statements, including those made over the last year, is his view that the peace process is the only way to achieve security and that security and stability in turn, are likely to bring foreign investment that will spur growth in the Israeli economy. This will produce the resources needed to deal with the deep-seated social problems facing Israel and the long-term investments that are required.

Barak, therefore, has expressed a clear belief in the primacy of peace. In an interview to the daily Ma'ariv in February 1999, he stated that, "The cornerstone of my policies is the determined renewal of the peace process. I will not allow for Israeli security to be harmed one iota. But, as someone who has spent much of his life fighting wars, I also understand that only a peace treaty, with clear red lines, can provide security and generate economic progress and social cohesion, which is the core of our true strength." (25)

According to Barak's strategic worldview, in peacetime, international companies with a focus on research and development will be drawn to Israel, and it will also be possible gradually to cut defense expenditure by small amounts. Barak does not couch his peace vision in utopian terms. His emphasis is rather on living a "normal" and stable existence in the region, with a domestic focus, with resources being directed to areas like education, transport infrastructure (including in the Negev) and the promotion of research and development. In Barak's view, Israel should look mainly to cooperation with the West.

Based on an analysis of Barak's personality and his statements, I feel it is possible to reach a number of conclusions that are relevant with regard to a future dialogue between Israel and Syria:

a. Barak's emphasis is on the issue of security. He is not an "adventurer" and will not gamble on Israel's security. In negotiations with the Syrians, Israel can therefore be expected to continue to insist that its vital security interests be safeguarded.

b. Barak is determined to promote the peace process, because he perceives peace with the Arab states as crucial in diverting resources from defense to socio-economic needs and to the development of the country's human resources -- the best way, in his view, of strengthening Israel's security.

c. The considerable majority that Barak won in the May 17 election provides him with enough latitude among the Israeli public to take tough decisions on the peace front, as in the case of the Golan. The Israeli public is less "ideological" in its thinking and could come to terms with a withdrawal from the Golan in return for security arrangements and normalization. There are, however, still differences among Israelis over permanent borders, and there are dangerous marginal groups whose activities already led to the assassination of one prime minister. A stormy struggle over the referendum to which Barak is committed can be expected.

d. Barak is likely to be a tough negotiating partner. That will be important with regard to his desire to present the Israeli public with an agreement that he feels he can promote without reservations. Still, he will be a straight, honest negotiator who will be able to implement the agreements reached between the various parties.

e. The reputation Barak earned for himself as a commander and fighter, as well as the fact that he is a graduate of the defense establishment, will assist him in achieving consensus among the Israeli public for any agreement he reaches with Syria.

f. Barak has set a time framework of a year to withdraw the Israeli army from Lebanon. He sees a clear connection between withdrawal and an agreement with Syria -- the only way, in his view, to achieve a comprehensive peace. In this light, I believe that in the coming months Israel will be ready to invest considerable time and effort in promoting negotiations with Syria. The key question is whether Barak will find a determined, consistent and creative partner on the other side of the border.

HAFEZ AL-ASAD: ONE LAST CHANCE

Syrian President Hafez al-Asad, born in 1929, seized power in a quiet coup in 1970, only three and half years after the 1967 War in which Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel. I make no pretension of presenting a biographical description of Asad (26), although it seems that the loss of the Golan Heights has remained an "open wound" for the Syrian leader who will find it difficult to rest easy without regaining the strategic mountain range. Getting it back will also mean restoring not only his prestige -- he served as defense minister in 1967 -- but also that of the Ba'ath party and the Syrian ruling elite (including the military leadership).

Syria, under Asad, has not discarded its Ba'athist, Pan-Arab and anti-Israel ideology. Nevertheless, Asad's approach has become far more pragmatic. This was evident in the comments made in an interview in the Syrian media in July last year by Chief of Staff Ali Aslan, who said that there was a need for a "united Arab approach against Israel that will be based first and foremost on the pan-Arab interest and which will strive to convince the United States to cease its blind preference of Israel."

Throughout his rule, the following principles appear to have directed Asad in his decision-making:

a. Preserving his regime. In other words, ensuring internal stability and ensuring he maintains his dominance, as well as that of the Alawites.

b. This has included the use of harsh measures to suppress any expression of opposition to his regime, as was the case with the uprising of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982.

c. Externalization of the country's domestic problems in order to achieve the unity required to face the main enemy -- Israel. Animosity toward Israel is as an internal unifying factor by the regime.

d. But Asad has also been wary of using force, having been burned in the past by military adventures such as the 1973 War and the 1982 War in Lebanon, which weakened his position. The result has been an increasing readiness to adopt a more pragmatic approach in place of the use of force, a trend that was apparent in the restraint Syria displayed and the concessions it made during the recent crisis with Turkey over the P.K.K.

e. In Asad's view, the prestige and standing of any nation, and especially Syria, is linked directly to its military and technological power versus that of its neighbors, its internal unity, its sense of the justice of its cause, as well as the nature of its ties with other regional states and with the superpowers. All these elements were included in Asad's conception of "strategic parity" with Israel. To this end -- achieving parity with Israel -- the support of the former Soviet Union was critical, as was Syria's ability to promote the Pan-Arab idea. Once these two pillars of the Syrian strategic doctrine collapsed, and Israel's growing strength was added to the other side of the equation, Syria's position on the peace process changed. Through a process that began years ago, Asad understands the futility of trying to achieve military, diplomatic, economic and technological parity with Israel. Indeed, for years, the strategic parity slogan has not featured in the Syrian president's public statements.

f. Understanding of the fact that Syria's interests can best be served through serious diplomatic moves, which could lead to the attainment of some key Syrian objectives such as the return of the Golan Heights, improved

relations with the U.S., recognition of Syria's status in Lebanon, and a boost in the Syrian economy. As a result, since the 1970s Asad has included diplomatic moves in his policy of confrontation with Israel, and in 1989 the Syrian leader renewed relations with Egypt -- indicating his recognition of the validity of the path chosen by Sadat. In 1991 Syria joined the anti-Iraq alliance during the Gulf War -- a blow to any Pan-Arab notions -- and later attended the Madrid conference – after which it entered into negotiations with Israel.

In my opinion, since 1991 Asad has increasingly understood that for Syria, peace will mean serious concessions to Israel with regard to security guarantees, as well as on other issues vital to Israel, such as water and an end to terror in south Lebanon. In his public statements, Asad has spoken of a "peace of the brave" and a "peace of chivalrous knights," and of his readiness for normal peaceful relations. It seems to me that Asad is anxious to reach a peace deal today, even if it means a period of tough bargaining. He will want to limit the price Syria will have to pay to get back the Golan and the deal will have to serve the interests of his regime and ensure his survival. Asad, by nature, is suspicious, slow, uncreative, and undaunted by the time factor. The result is that in the past he has missed opportunities for a real breakthrough in the peace process.

As time passes, I have no doubt that Asad realizes that he won't have many more chances for achieving his objective of regaining the Golan. He is a realistic leader who is aware of the problematic implications of both global and regional developments for Syria. He is fully cognizant of the limitations of his military power, of the fact that he does not have a strategic alternative to the former Soviet Union, that Syria is isolated internationally and in the Arab world, and that the potential for domestic problems is growing.

It seems that if Asad makes a sober analysis of today's reality, he can assume the following:

a. On the personal level, he is dealing with an Israeli prime minister who is at the beginning of his term and able to reach a deal with Syria. That, of course, is on condition that Israel's demands in the critical area of security are recognized and met. It seems Asad feels more comfortable with generals (like Rabin, and now Barak) than with civilian diplomats. Rabin he understood; Peres's vision frightened him. As a rule, people with a military background like Asad seem to find a common language more easily with their counterparts from foreign countries.

b. Israel has no intention of spurring dramatic changes in the Middle East as part of the "peace package." On the contrary, Israel is fully aware of Syria's domestic constraints, as well as the Syrian interest in gaining prestige and honor, and in proceeding at a pace that will allow the regime to prepare public opinion for an agreement and maintain internal stability. In other words, Israel will be willing to accept a staged approach (for example on the withdrawal-normalization axis) that does not go forward at a pace the Syrians will find difficult to digest. (27)

c. The chance for improved relations with the U.S. still exists, and the Americans will be ready to assist Syria in adapting to an economy of peace -- not along the lines of the revolutionary Russian model, but rather through a slow, careful process that will not undermine the regime. Nevertheless, time is not unlimited. The U.S. elections in the year 2,000, for instance, will impact on President Bill Clinton's ability to influence the peace process. Moreover, the Americans still bear the scars of previous encounters with Asad, in which they found the Syrian leader contemptuous. The onus, therefore, will be on Asad to convince the Americans that he is ready to take the fundamental decisions that will enable them to play a serious mediation role.

d. If there is no progress on the Syrian track and there is serious movement on the Palestinian track, then Syria's bargaining power will be weakened in negotiations with Israel.

e. The possibility of a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon is likely to be on the agenda in the future. This could lead to a refashioning of the Israeli policy toward terror attacks -- a development that could test Syria and result in tension between the two sides, something neither Israel nor Syria is interested in.

f. Asad is unsure whether his son Bashar, whom he is grooming as his successor, has the ability to either make peace on his own or to wage a future military conflict against Israel. If Asad has such doubts, these should motivate him to reach a negotiated solution.

In conclusion, the option of stubbornly sticking to rigid Syrian positions in negotiations with Israel does not hold any real positive gains for Asad. It's difficult to imagine that in the future Asad will find a more amenable government in Israel than the one that exists today.(28) Syria, from its point of view, made gains in peace talks with Israel, and Asad's personal acquaintance with President Clinton should stand him in good stead with regard to the U.S. commitment to advance the process. Moreover, the Arab world also expects a resumption of the Israeli-Syrian dialogue. Indeed, Asad's moment of truth is fast approaching. Syria is in a position today where it needs a settlement if it is to achieve its goals, and an agreement with Israel could ensure both stability and economic growth for Syria at the outset of the 21st century. "Syria will continue to wage a determined battle for peace," Asad has said. "She wants peace because it is a regional and global imperative, and it promises prosperity for all." (29)

CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVANCING THE PROCESS

On the verge of the millennium, Israel and Syria are facing a new stage in the peace process. Even though the past decade failed to produce a breakthrough in the process, it has led to better mutual understanding of the limits of power and both countries are interested in achieving a political settlement that will help them achieve their national goals.

An atmosphere of trust between Israel and Syria has yet to be created and mutual suspicion is still high. Nevertheless, the lessons of the previous negotiations before they broke off in March 1996 and a reduction in the intensity of that mutual suspicion indicates that Israel and Syria will be able to hold serious negotiations, jointly examine practical solutions and even take into account each others specific problems. (30)

In my view, Syria and Israel are ready for a new stage in the process -- a stage in which the leaders will have to display political wisdom in the effort to reach a settlement. While there are weighty, complicated issues on the table, they are soluble, on condition that the leaders are guided by the principle that other side's gain could be their gain too. This process will require maturity, mutual trust and the leaders' sense that their peoples are ready to exploit the peace process to promote national interests, with the emphasis on socio-economic resilience.

How can the sides move forward? Based on lessons learned from the previous negotiations, a number of parameters should be set that will improve the chances of success in future talks:

a. There is a need for the two leaders to reach a strategic understanding whereby they are both determined to renew negotiations and to agree upon as brief a timetable as possible for reaching a settlement. This will also

require them to prepare their respective peoples for the possibility of an agreement.

b. An atmosphere of mutual trust between the leaders will also be crucial. The sides should not insist on reaching agreement over the point at which the negotiations were broken off, and when talks do restart, openness, informality and chemistry between the negotiating teams will be essential. To this end there is a need to substantially reduce the mutual expressions of animosity in the media so as to allow for the negotiations to take place in as comfortable and businesslike a fashion as possible.

c. A new understanding has to be reached between the two sides regarding the major elements of an agreement. This must include the price that each side will have to pay, including the following components:

    1. An Israeli withdrawal on the Golan Heights.

    2. Security arrangements that will guarantee the peace.

    3. Reciprocal, but not equal, demilitarized zones on both sides of the border, as well as limited forces zones. A third type of zone in which both countries' offensive options are limited.

    4. Full and normal diplomatic relations between the two countries, at the least along the lines of the Egyptian model. All the components related to normalization, though, do not have to be included in the treaty that will be signed, but can be concluded later in the framework of bilateral talks.

    5. Placing Lebanon at the top of the list of issues to be dealt with in the negotiations with the aim of ending terror, of renewing talks between Israel and Lebanon, and of incorporating a settlement in Lebanon into the time-line of the Israel-Syria track. A breakthrough

on the Syrian track will allow for the implementation of the Lebanon settlement as the first stage of an agreement between Jerusalem and Damascus. In this context, it is important that Asad understand the pressures that Barak faces at home with regard to security and peace issues, while it is equally important that Israel understand the constraints Asad faces with regard to the Golan Heights.

6. It will also be advisable for the two sides to reach practical solutions regarding the issues of water and borders, rather than legalistic solutions that may well result in the two sides getting locked in inflexible, formalistic positions.

7. Getting Syrian understanding for the fact that Israel will continue to face distant threats and will therefore need to maintain sufficient military force to defend itself. The aim of this component is to satisfy Israel's need to maintain its strategic capability (which will not be aimed at Syria which would be at peace with it) and to convince other countries to join the circle of peace.

Time is moving fast, especially with regard to Asad. If the Syrian leader hopes to reach an agreement with Israel and to prepare the ground for his son to succeed him, he will have to accelerate the slow decision-making process he is accustomed to and which has characterized him in the past. The time frame in which an agreement can most likely be achieved is not unlimited. It will run until the middle of the year 2000. The time frame is related to a number of factors:

a. May 2000: The European Union's Berlin declaration set a target of one year for conclusion of the permanent status talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The intention was a year from the renewal of talks, with the assumption being that they would begin immediately after the Israeli elections in May 1999. Although the target date may well be shifted from May 2000, if it approaches with no discernible progress on the

Israeli-Syrian axis, Israel and the U.S. will inevitably make a more substantive investment in the negotiations with the Palestinians, which would become the main negotiating channel. Conversely, progress on the Israeli-Syrian track could defer a permanent settlement with the Palestinians.

b. November 2000: This is the date for the U.S. presidential elections. The cut-off point with regard to American involvement in the process may, however, be several months earlier, especially if President Clinton comes to the conclusion that there are serious differences over key issues in the negotiations. In such a scenario, he is likely to distance himself from the peace process, as it will not provide him with any major achievement to wave in front of the American public to boost the Democratic party's election prospects.

c. Summer 2000: Barak's declared intention to withdraw from Lebanon by July 2000 will also affect the timetable for negotiations with Syria. Paralysis on the Syrian track is likely to increase the calls in Israel for a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon -- a move that would weaken one of Syria's strongest negotiating cards.

U.S. involvement is vital if the process is to move forward. The Americans will have to invest energy and thought, both in dealing with the time factor as well as with the leaders involved in the negotiations. Its tasks will be multiple and complicated:

a. To guide the parties toward renewing talks, on the basis of agreed understandings between them.

b. To promote confidence building measures between the two sides.

c. To assist in building a framework for an agreement.

d. To make suggestions to help bridge differences.

e. To help Israel with the supply and financing of its security needs. The U. S. will have to compensate Israel, as Syria will gaining territory, while Israel will giving up territory and will have to finance the cost of withdrawal.

f. To offer Syria economic incentives.

g. To rally regional and international support -- both diplomatic and economic for an agreement. The Europeans along with the Japanese and world financial bodies, can play a central role in this sphere.

h. To be ready to play role in the supervisory and verification arrangements.

To effectively fulfill this role, the Americans will have to show great sensitivity to the interests of both sides, but especially to Israel's positions and to give them preference wherever definitions of security needs are involved. They will have to be involved in the negotiations at the most detailed level. They will also have to be ready to push the two sides into taking tough decisions by presenting hypothetical questions, as well as their own ideas, and by assembling possible package deals. At the same time the U.S. will have to keep an eye on the Palestinians to ensure they do not become frustrated and begin taking steps that undermine the Syria-Israel track.

The load on the Americans will be heavy. In my view they will be ready to take it on because of the fact that a settlement between Israel and Syria will clearly serve their fundamental interests. Still, the Americans will want to see a readiness on both sides to make compromises. The U.S. will not impose a solution on the parties, and no-one should expect any crisis in U.S.-Israel relations over the negotiations -- especially on the eve of elections in the U.S., and against the backdrop of America's longtime commitment to Israel's security. The bottom line: The Americans still see the Israelis and the Syrians as the two players ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the process.

A few comments on the negotiating framework:

a. The smaller the negotiating teams, the greater the chance that the talks will be businesslike and informal, and that the necessary chemistry between the participants will be created. Large negotiating teams tend to make secrecy difficult, reduce intimacy and encourage the sides to take hard-line, rigid positions.

b. Still, it is advisable that the negotiating teams include the right mix of political, security and economic delegates -- something which will assist in putting together a well-integrated agreement. The heads of the negotiating teams must have the experience and skill that will enable them to build a package deal.

c. The heads of the negotiating teams have to be directly connected to the two leaders, Barak and Asad. This will underline the importance that the leaders attach to the negotiations and will speed up the talks themselves.

d. The first stages of the talks should be held in a limited "core group" that will determine the general framework for the negotiations. Afterwards, the teams dealing with specific issues like security, borders and diplomatic relations should begin their work. It will also be advisable for legal teams to begin formulating a draft of the agreement.

e. Alongside the work of the various negotiating teams, there will be a need for a secret channel which will allow the two leaders to make major decisions that will push the process forward.

f. Every effort must be made to ensure that the talks run continuously so as not to lose momentum.

In conclusion, the negotiations between Israel and Syria, when they are renewed, present a historical opportunity to change the relations between the two countries. The conditions are ripe from a global and regional perspective, and there is a desire on both sides to move forward. In my view, both sides are ready to begin the journey down the path to peace. Both Barak and Asad will have to show determination as they traverse this path, if they are to achieve their ultimate aim of peace and security for their peoples.

SOURCES

1. The Syrian press frequently accuses Israel of meddling and trying to provoke crises between the U.S. and Iraq. See, for example, Al-Thawra, February 25, 1998, and Tishrin, February 17, 1998.

2. See Asad's address on his inauguration for a 5th term of office, Damascus Radio, March 13, 1999.

3. See interview with Syria's Vice President, Abdel Khalim Khaddam, to Al-Mustaqbal, February 3, 1995, in which he explains Syria's surprise and anger at the separate treaties with Israel and interview with Asad's son, Bashar, to Al-Kifah al-Arabi, February 4, 1999, in which he argues that the separate deals "gave Israel significant gains."

4. Syrian Defense Minister Talas refers extensively to this subject in an interview with the Kuwaiti daily Al-Anba, September 30, 1998, in which he scathingly attacks Jordan for joining the Israeli-Turkish alliance. In an interview with Al-Ba'th, July 30, 1998, the Syrian Chief of Staff, Aslan, declared that Israel had "made a dubious alliance with Turkish generals tied to the U.S., the aim of which was to frighten the Arab nation and Syria."

5. See interview with the Syrian Finance Minister, Al-Mu'ayna, to Al-Ba'th, September 1, 1997.

6. The Americans protested vehemently while the Syrians apologized and promised to pay about half a million dollars in damages. Al-Hayat, February 25, 1999, Radio Monte Carlo, February 13, 1999.

7. See, for example, Asad's interview with Evans and Novak, CNN, September 25, 1996.

8. Syrian Foreign Minister Al-Shar'a often complained that Jordan's ties with Israel were warmer than with any of the Arab states. See interviews, MBC and BBC, February 4-5, 1999.

9. In this context, it is worth noting Al-Shar'a's comments on Algerian Television, March 19, 1998, that "no one wants war, aims for war, or thinks about war if a political solution can achieve results without casualties."

10. For a more detailed account, see Uri Savir, The Process: 1100 Days that Changed the Middle East, Random House (New York, 1998), Helena Cobban, Syria and the Peace: A Good Chance Missed, Carlisle Barracks, PA, U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, July 7, 1997, and Itamar Rabinovich, The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1998.

11. See, for example, Asad's interviews with Al-Ahram, December 28, 1996, and CNN, September 25, 1996, and the comments of Syria's Ambassador to Washington

Walid Mu'allim, who, citing Israeli publications, declared that Rabin committed himself through the Americans to a full withdrawal from the Golan, Saudi Newsagency, August 30, 1997.

12. See, for example, Aluf Ben, "The Golan Heights File," Ha'aretz, January 14, 1997.

13. See Jerusalem Post, December 19, 1995, for a detailed account of the 10 new points raised by Peres to the Syrians as a basis for starting negotiations.

14. Turkish Daily News, Ankara, February 15, 1996.

15. French Newsagency, January 14, 1997, and interview by Mu'allim to Saudi Newsagency, August 30,1997.

16. See Radio Monte Carlo commentary from Damascus, February 9, 1996.

17. Interview with Vice President Khaddam, MBC Television February 9, 1997.

18. See Mu'allim interview with Al-Safir, January 17, 1997, and interview with Israeli Television, November 12, 1997, in which he expresses astonishment at Israel's invoking agreements from the Mandatory period on the Syrian front, while refusing to implement them on the Palestinian front.

19. See Ze'ev Schiff, Ha'aretz, May 28, 1999, and Daniel Pipes, "What Netanyahu Almost Gave Away," New Republic, July 5, 1998, and Netanyahu's interview with Israeli Television, Channel 2, July 14, 1999.

20. Interview with Al-Wasat, April 27, 1999.

21. It should be pointed out that the June 4, 1967 line is not demarcated or defined and merely expresses the effective areas of control by each side prior to the outbreak of the Six Day War. The international border of 1923 is the only line between Israel and Syria to have been accorded binding international and legal validity. The Syrian demand for withdrawal to the June 4 lines is motivated by considerations of prestige and national honor and by a desire to make gains across the 1923 border, especially El-Hama and parts of the Kinneret. But, from the point of view of international law, the Syrian position is weak.

22. See statement by then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at the opening of the Knesset's winter session, October 3, 1994.

23. Radio Damascus, February 17, 1996.

24. See Aboulhay Saed, "National Threat Perceptions in the Middle East, " UNIDIR, Geneva, September, 1995.

25. See interview with Barak, Ma'ariv, February 2, 1999.

26. See Patrick Seale, Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East, University of California Press, California, 1989, and Moshe Maoz, Assad-The Sphynx of Damascus: A Political Biography, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, (London and N.Y., 1998).

27. See Mu'allim's comment when discussing Peres' policy, Al-Safir, January 17, 1997, and "Fresh light on Syrian-Israel peace negotiations," Journal of Palestine Studies, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, Winter 1997, pp. 81-94.

28. It is worth noting that in the past, the Syrians believed and said that there was no difference between the Likud and Labor. Ironically, there were even those who actually wanted a change in government in 1996. Asad himself said so once. There is no doubt now that Asad recognizes his error. Rabin's assassination and the consequences of Netanyahu's coming to power must have shaken him. One can assume that he now understands the political structure in Israel better, and that chances are both created and missed, and that now there is a fresh opportunity.

29. Asad, in a message to the Syrian Army, SANA, July 31, 1998.

30. See "The Prospects for the Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations," The James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy Study, Number 8, Rice University, Houston, Texas, August 1998.