

A “Track-in-Waiting”: The Prospects of New Israeli–Syrian Negotiations

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The Israeli–Syrian negotiating track, a mainstay of the peace process in its heyday in the 1990s, and which was briefly revived in 2007–2008, can today best be described as a “track-in-waiting.” For their own reasons, the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government each prefer to invest their initial efforts in the Israeli–Palestinian track. Washington did renew a dialogue with Damascus, as candidate Obama promised to do, but this give-and-take has been unfolding slowly through numerous difficulties. The prospect of full-fledged, two-track negotiation—a US–Syrian effort to transform the bilateral relations between the two countries and the related Israeli–Syrian peace negotiations—remains part of the Middle-Eastern diplomatic landscape. An assessment of the reality of this prospect should be preceded by a brief review of the efforts to implement these very ideas during the past two decades.

Washington, Jerusalem and Damascus: 1991–2009

The trilateral relationship between Washington, Jerusalem and Damascus has, since the Madrid Conference in October 1991, gone through three main phases:

The Priming Years: 1991–2000

Both the Bush–Baker administration during its final year and the Clinton administration during the rest of the 1990s assigned priority to the Syrian track over the Palestinian one of the Arab–Israeli peace process.¹ Both viewed the Palestinian issue as “the core conflict,” but both believed that it was easier to make a deal between two states. They believed in Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad’s will and ability to make the deal and saw such a transaction as the key to a diplomatic change in the region.

This view was shared, most of the time, by four successive Israeli prime ministers: Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak. All four used a version of Rabin's "deposit" in order to convey to Syria their conditional willingness to withdraw from the Golan in return for a package of peace and security. And yet, despite these efforts and al-Asad's apparent willingness to make peace with Israel and his desire to transform his relations with Washington, a breakthrough failed to occur. The trilateral efforts finally collapsed in March 2000 during the meeting between Bill Clinton and al-Asad.

Asad died in June of that year, thus ending this first phase of the negotiations. Ironically, while precedence was given in the 1990s to the Syrian track, actual progress and agreements were achieved on the Palestinian track. What was accomplished on the Syrian track was an adumbration of the contours of an Israeli-Syrian agreement, one that could be made once Jerusalem and Damascus displayed the necessary political will.

George W. Bush, Ariel Sharon and Bashar al-Asad, 2001–2006

The diplomatic calculus that gave precedence to the Syrian track during the 1990s was reversed by several developments that occurred in 2000–2001: al-Asad's death and his replacement by his son Bashar, the election of George W. Bush, Ariel Sharon's election and 9/11.²

Hafiz al-Asad's persona and record were important factors in the American and Israeli preference for a Syrian deal in the 1990s. He was seen as a tough bargainer, but also as a leader capable of making a deal. He had a proven track record of respecting the terms of the agreements he made and "delivering the goods." His son Bashar, certainly during his early years in power, was seen as weak and less than fully serious. On Bashar's watch, Syria's relations with Iran (a strategic partnership between two peers) and with Hizbullah (a patron-client relationship) were altered. Syria was increasingly seen as an Iranian client and lost much of its sway over Hizbullah.

Israel's Ariel Sharon, unlike his four predecessors, neither sought nor believed in a deal with Syria. He focused on the Palestinian issue and was opposed to the notion of an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights that was bound to be part and parcel of any peace agreement with Syria. This view became increasingly compatible with that of George W. Bush, who began his presidency with a reluctance to engage in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. As time went by, the course of events forced him to invest time and effort in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the same course of events made him increasingly hostile to Bashar al-Asad and his regime.

The Bush administration had a litany of grievances toward Damascus: its double game with regard to Iraq; its support of terrorist organizations; its close relations with Iran; its acquisition of weapon of mass destruction (WMD); its support of Hizbullah; and its larger quest for hegemony in Lebanon at the expense of Lebanon's sovereignty and democracy. By 2005, two issues came to dominate the US president's view of Syria: its support for the Sunni insurrection in Iraq and its trampling of Lebanese sovereignty and democracy, both of which were eventually validated by the Bush administration.

Of the options available to Washington with regard to Syria, the Bush administration avoided both ends of the spectrum—it did not seek a dialogue with Damascus nor did it launch military actions against it. Instead, it opted to penalize Syria by trying to delegitimize and isolate it. The Bush administration imposed (mild) sanctions on Syria and demonstrated no interest in reviving Israeli–Syrian negotiations.

In sharp contrast to the lack of interest in Washington and Jerusalem, Bashar al-Asad and other spokesmen for his regime declared on several occasions that Syria wanted to resume the peace talks (“at the point at which they were interrupted”). This position was qualified by a warning that the alternative to peace talks was war and by actual preparations for such an option.

The Olmert Years

When Ehud Olmert replaced Sharon as prime minister in 2006, he initially continued the same policy with regard to Syria. Olmert rebuffed mediation efforts with Syria and implied that his negative response was influenced, if not shaped, by the Bush administration's policies.

Still, in early 2007, Olmert changed his mind and agreed to Turkish mediation between Israel and Syria. In the aftermath of the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, and with the support of Israel's national security establishment, Olmert was now willing to explore the prospects of a “Syrian option.” Prime Minister Olmert had a close personal relationship with President Bush, and he did brief him on the change in policy. Bush was unhappy with the Israeli decision that could undermine his efforts to isolate Syria, but decided not to veto or object to Olmert's change of heart. Instead, he adopted a position stating that the US would not be a party to such negotiations. To be sure, Syria did want to regain the Golan, but from its perspective, peace with Israel was seen primarily as the prelude to a new relationship with Washington. This meant that as long as George W. Bush was president, Damascus viewed the negotiations primarily as a vehicle

for breaking out of its isolation and for extracting from Israel concessions that would reinforce the Syrian case when “real” negotiations were resumed.

These dynamics were accentuated as Olmert’s personal and domestic political problems mounted in the spring of 2008. Olmert was now interested in publicizing the semi-clandestine negotiations in Turkey. So were the Syrians, who converted the publicity into diplomatic capital as evidenced by Bashar al-Asad’s visit to Paris in 2008. Damascus could also register two other successes: Israel agreed to indirect talks (while in the 1990s and in 2000 direct talks were held at a senior level) and to the inclusion of three of the six sites suggested by Syria as points of reference for setting the future border in the event of peace. Some may see all of this as diplomatic and legalistic pettiness, but Damascus is consistent in its efforts to build a legal portfolio supporting its demand that Israel withdraw to the lines of June 4, 1967.

The Turkish mediation, which lasted until the eve of Israel’s Gaza operation at the end of 2008, also reflected an important change in Israel’s outlook on a prospective peace deal with Syria. In the 1990s, Israel’s negotiations with Syria were conducted in the shadow of Israel’s peacemaking with Egypt in the late 1970s. The underlying formula was “land for peace,” and the guiding principle was full withdrawal in return for a mutually agreed package of peace and security.

By the early 2000s this concept was no longer attractive to Israeli policy makers and the public. The “cold peace” with Egypt, the semi-cold peace with Jordan and the collapse of the Oslo process eliminated the enthusiasm for, and expectations of, a transformational peace with the Arab world. Israel was more concerned with regional security than with normalization of its ties with Syria. Israel (and Washington) would now put the emphasis on Syria’s distancing itself from Iran and Hizbullah as an essential element of any peacemaking. As former US ambassador Martin Indyk put it: “territories for peace” was replaced by “territories for strategic realignment.”

There was another interesting and novel dimension to Israel’s relationship with Syria during Olmert’s tenure. In the 1990s, Israel’s policy makers were baffled and frustrated by the fact that while he negotiated with Israel, Asad continued to support violence launched against Israel by Lebanese and Palestinian groups. In Hafiz al-Asad’s mind, diplomacy had to rely on power and force, and pressure had to be exerted until a final agreement was reached. Olmert did not quite adopt this philosophy, but while negotiations unfolded, he destroyed a nuclear reactor built by Syria with North Korean help and may have authorized other less publicized actions directed at Syrian targets.

Current Perspectives

With the installation of Barack Obama's administration and the formation of Benjamin Netanyahu's government in early 2009, two-thirds of the American–Israeli–Syrian triangle was transformed.

Obama the candidate spoke about his determination “to engage” Iran and Syria in line with the recommendations put forth by the Baker–Hamilton Committee in 2007. Upon assuming office, he emphasized his commitment to pursue an Arab–Israeli peace process and to place that issue high on the list of priorities of his foreign policy. But he also made it quite clear that the Palestinian issue was particularly important to him. Indeed, to a President who sought to repair America's relationship with the Muslim and Arab worlds, resolving—or at least addressing—the Palestinian problem seemed more urgent than dealing with Damascus.

It has taken Prime Minister Netanyahu several months to come to terms with this US policy. It remains to be seen how the give-and-take between Washington and Jerusalem will unfold, but at this point Washington clearly understands that its Israeli counterpart can at best deal successfully with the Israeli–Palestinian track and that “an engagement” with Damascus will have to deal with a broader agenda before actual negotiations can take place.

This is not just a product of Netanyahu's unwillingness and political inability to deal with the two tracks simultaneously nor his manifest refusal to withdraw from the Golan as part of a peace deal with Syria. During its “journey of discovery,” the Obama administration discovered how difficult it was to build a dialogue with Damascus. Washington's public objective of building such a dialogue sent a flurry of congressional and European visitors to Damascus, inflated the Asad regime's self-confidence and turned it into a particularly difficult partner. It took some time until the Obama administration felt that it could dispatch its senior Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, to Damascus to meet with President Bashar al-Asad.

At present, the administration's policy is to develop a comprehensive dialogue with Syria, to discuss such regional issues as Iraq and Lebanon and to address as part of this agenda the resumption of the Syrian–Israeli track of the peace process. Asad's regime is understandably not happy with this state of affairs and set of priorities. Its response to Washington's choice is to keep the channel open but to respond to America's expectations in Iraq and Lebanon in a very limited way. Several American analysts and commentators have indeed complained recently that there is no change in Syria's conduct and that what George W. Bush failed to achieve by carrying a big stick, Barack Obama fails to accomplish by speaking softly.⁵ This is

clearly a temporary and unstable state of affairs. But several variables need to be considered in order to understand when it is likely to change.

First is the evolution of the Israeli–Palestinian track. Success in the current efforts would delay the resumption of the Israeli–Syrian peace process and would require a greater US investment in maintaining the overall relationship with Syria. Conversely, failure or limited success would push the Syrian track to the diplomatic front.

Second is the dual linkage to the larger Iranian issue. The less likely prospect is for the US–Iranian dialogue to take off and to reflect positively on the relationship with Iran’s ally, Syria. The more likely prospect is for Obama’s Iranian gambit to fail and for Syria to become a more valuable asset in a diplomatic campaign to isolate Tehran and to diminish its regional position.

Third, Washington’s perspective on Middle East diplomacy will continue to evolve. The Obama administration’s early expectations of swift progress on several Middle Eastern fronts have already been replaced by a more modest and realistic view. A four- or even eight-year perspective of the Arab–Israeli peace process could result in an entirely different view of a desirable timeline for an Israeli–Syrian peace deal.

The Israeli government’s current outlook on the Syrian track could change in the event of a deadlock on the Palestinian track; in the event of a greater effort to deal with the Iranian issue; or in the event that the challenges presented by Hizbullah and Hamas from Lebanon and Gaza regain their previous urgency. This would force Netanyahu’s government (assuming that such a development happens on its watch) to come to grips with the issue of withdrawal from the Golan. Bearing in mind that during his first term as prime minister, Netanyahu had agreed to that step in principle in 1998–1999 through the “Lauder Mission”—and that his principal partner, Ehud Barak, is a “Syria-firster” (preferring the Syrian track to the Palestinian one)—such a turn of events cannot be ruled out.

Notes:

¹ For a review and analysis of the Syrian–Israeli negotiations of the 1990s, see my *The Brink of Peace: The Israeli–Syrian Negotiations* (New York, 1988); Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York, 2004); Martin Indyk, *Innocent Abroad* (New York, 2009); Aaron Miller, *Too Much Promised Land* (New York, 2008); Daniel C. Kurtzer and Scott Lasensky, *Negotiating Arab–Israeli Peace* (Washington, DC, 2008).

- ² For a study of the American–Israeli–Syrian relationship during this period, see my analysis paper, “Damascus, Jerusalem, and Washington: The Syrian–Israeli Relationship as a US Policy Issue” (Brookings Institution, 2009).
- ³ Frida Ghitis, “No Peace Harvest So Far for Obama’s Syria Policy,” *World Politics Review* (2009), www.worldpoliticsreview.com/article.aspx?id=4221; Andrew Tabler, “Syria Clenches Its Fist,” The Washington Institute For Near-East Policy, 2009, www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1330.

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