

The Syrian and Israel Peace Talks: The End of the Dispute?

On 15 December 1999, the peace talks between Syria and Israel resumed in Washington. They had been halted by Israel in March 1996 after Damascus refused to condemn the Hamas terrorist attacks that had rocked Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in the preceding months. (There may be a certain symbolic significance in the fact that the talks were resumed 18 years and one day after passage of the Golan Heights (Annexation) Law by the Israeli Knesset on 14 December 1981). Despite the hardline address delivered by the Syrian Foreign Minister, Farouq Sharaa, we can presume that these negotiations will conclude in a peace treaty between Damascus and Jerusalem. If so, the relevant question is what motivations and interests are compelling the Assad regime to reach an agreement with Israel at this time.

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There is little doubt that the ideological stance taken by Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority toward Israel has changed little if at all. Hence, it would be foolhardy to expect peaceful relations between the two countries to resemble the North American or Western European model; that is, a peace based on a shared political culture and western democratic values. An inclusive Syrian-Israeli or Arab-Israeli peace is still far off. Instead, Assad, like Sadat, Arafat, and, of course, Hussein, is being driven toward a political arrangement with Israel by regional, global, and internal interests having a strategic-military, economic, and political character. The Arab strategy that evolved in the wake of the Yom Kippur War is based on the recognition of Israel's military, technological and economic supremacy, and on the massive support Israel receives from the US. Because a battlefield victory is out of the question,

the preferable alternative is to reach a political solution that would encompass return of territories Israel captured during the Six Day War and realisation of Palestinian rights. This awareness conveyed Egypt to Camp David in 1978 and to a peace agreement with Israel in 1979. Jordan adopted a similar policy as early as 1970 in response to the events of “Black September.” It apparently also influenced the PLO: On 12 June 1974, the Palestinian National Council, for the first time in its history, modified its position toward Israel.

Syria first recognised Security Council Resolution 338 in late 1973. Resolution 338 is almost identical in meaning to Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967, a document implying “territory for peace” or a political settlement with Israel. Although Syria has demanded return of all its territory conquered by Israel in 1967, it has slowly become willing to grant Israel a de facto non-aggression “pact,” or “peace” in its terms. This position derives from, among other things, the fact that Israel’s governments, especially that of Yitzhak Shamir (for example, during the Madrid Conference, 1991), have been unwilling to return the Golan Heights to Syrian sovereignty. Only after the election of the late Yitzhak Rabin as prime minister in 1992, and Rabin’s public announcement that Resolution 242 pertained to the Golan Heights as well, did Damascus begin to define peace with Israel in terms of normalisation, including diplomatic relations.

During the 1992-1995 negotiations, the Assad regime took various steps to prepare the Syrian public for peace with Israel. For instance, Assad and other leaders repeatedly stated that these negotiations represented their country’s “strategic option and that they supported “normal peaceful relations” so that “the Arabs and the Israelis could live under conditions of security, stability, and prosperity.” The Syrian Minister of Education even spoke of the need to develop a program of “peace studies.” At the same time, the Syrian government permitted its Jewish citizens to emigrate, and allowed Arab-Israeli Knesset members and journalists to visit Damascus. These gestures were certainly sporadic in nature and desisted after the talks with Israel were suspended. Recently, however, given the possibility of renewed talks, favourable winds are again wafting from Syria, and phrases such as “an historic opportunity” for an inclusive are being heard once more. Billboards have even appeared in Damascus promoting the peace.

At the press conference held in the White House on 15 December 1999, Farouq Sharaa emphasised, for the first time, prospects for an inclusive peace and for the opening of a cultural dialogue that would convey a sense of genuine harmony and security to the region. He even suggested an end to viewing the conflict as a “battle” for survival. In its place, he suggested that the conflict be

perceived solely as a border dispute. (Nonetheless, Sharaa repeated his former adamant position, as stated, and accused Israel of expelling Syrian residents of the Golan and of destroying their settlements. He also demanded Israel's complete withdrawal from the Golan Heights, an act that would, he argued, topple the Israelis' "psychological barricade of fear").

We may assume, therefore, that the Syrians have no intention, at present, of reaching an "historic peace" with Israel unless it receives the entire Golan Heights and, not less important, in light of Lebanon's strategic and economic importance, is permitted to maintain its sway over that country. The final and equally important condition necessary for a fruitful culmination of the talks is a very generous economic assistance package to be delivered by the US in the form of grants and investment for the purpose of developing the faltering Syrian economy.

Clearly, the economic, territorial, and hegemonic factors represent the crucial considerations prompting Syria's willingness to reach a settlement with Israel. This type of peace would permit an additional reduction in its military budget (which has declined continuously and significantly over recent years) and would lead to the removal of Syria from the American "blacklist" of nations supporting international terrorism. These events, so the Syrians hope, would award them with tangible economic benefits. It appears, then, that the Syrian public, especially its new middle class—members of the business community, industrialists, and entrepreneurs, the majority of whom are Sunni Moslems—want stability and socio-economic prosperity. Assad's government, despite its autocratic character, has a clear interest in improving the nation's standard of living, a programme intended to reinforce the socio-political foundations of the regime.