

*Attention Dr. T. Warden*

The Prospects of Peace  
between  
Israel and Syria

by

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Introduction:

The Syrian decision to respond positively to the American initiative in July, 1991, and to participate in a peace conference - under the joint chairmanship of the United States and the Soviet Union - was either received with surprise or, at best, with mixed feelings. The key question was whether that decision constituted a radical change in the Syrian position regarding Israel, or that it was merely a tactical move by the Syrian regime to protect itself in the aftermath of the war against Iraq in 1991 by the international coalition. Corollary to this, was to what extent had Syria accommodated itself with changes in the regional and international strategic environment since the end of the Cold War.

Under the above two principal questions, a set of secondary ones can be subsumed. Has Syria really become so vulnerable as to shift to accommodation instead of confrontation with Israel? If it has responded

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to new regional and international factors, is there a basic transformation in the orientation of Syria's foreign policy, or simply a minor modification to suit unforeseen prevailing conditions? Does Syria truly believe in peaceful coexistence with Israel? What exactly is its conception of a peaceful settlement? and to what degree has it been modified whether in substance or in form?

This paper shall illustrate that since 1970-1971, when the present Ba'athist regime under the leadership of President Hafez Al-Assad assumed power, Syria's position towards Israel and its conception of a peaceful settlement has gone through incremental alterations over time. Whereas the fundamental point of departure, namely, the acceptance of the reality of Israel within its pre-1967 borders and a comprehensive settlement, has remained consistent, the road to reaching a settlement, its shape and modalities, has been subjected to variations under the pressure of changing internal, regional and international conditions.

1 - Special factors determining Syrian attitudes:

The Syrians, in common with other Arabs, share the general perception of Israel as being a foreign and expansionist entity which was implanted in their midst by the ex-colonial powers of Britain and France, with the assistance of the United States and the Soviet Union as well. The historical and religious claims advanced by Israel are deemed irrelevant, since the Palestinian Arabs had been in continuous possession of the land of Palestine for over a thousand years.<sup>1</sup> Even the legality of the UN Partition Resolution 181(II) of 1947, that created the legal basis of Israel as a state, was questioned by the Arabs and was ascribed to American pressure to obtain a majority vote.<sup>2</sup> However, three special factors have given Syrian perceptions and attitudes certain distinguishing characteristics.

a) The historical factor derives from the unfulfilled aspirations of establishing the independent state of Syria, including Palestine and Lebanon (Jordan did not exist at the time) " within its natural

boundaries", in accordance with the resolution of the General Syrian Congress of 8 March, 1920.<sup>3</sup> \*

b) The Syrians in general, and the ruling Ba'ath party, in particular, regard themselves as the standard bearers of Arab nationalism. Moreover, the Ba'ath party considers itself the inheritor and successor of the Arab nationalist movements which flourished in Syria and Lebanon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup>

c) Since the October war of 1973, and with the gradual enhancement of its military power, Syria has become more assertive in the Levant and on the Arab level overall. This transformation in the standing of Syria, from being an object in the inter-Arab politics of Egypt and Iraq, to an influential and major Arab regional power, has endowed it with a commensurate sense of responsibility for leading the struggle against Israel, particularly after the Peace Treaty signed between Egypt and Israel in 1979.<sup>5</sup>

The above special factors in turn produce three important outcomes which affect Syrian attitudes:

1) The Syrians view the conflict with Israel in long-term perspectives, owing to the disadvantageous and imbalanced distribution of power in favour of Israel. This view is not only confined to reaching a settlement that meets Arab conditions, but is also related to the ultimate resolution of the conflict in the strictest sense. Such a stance obviously puts Syria at odds with the Palestinians who are the principal victims of the situation and time is not on their side.

2) The Syrians also enjoy a feeling of confidence and self righteousness over the conflict; and consequently, they are dismissive of both Arab

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\* This historical factor does not constitute an expansionist ideology as Daniel Pipes erroneously attempts to portray in his book: Greater Syria: A History of an Ambition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Syria accepts the legitimacy of Jordan, Lebanon and the objective of a Palestinian state; and it is now engaged in the peace process to recognise Israel.

criticism and western opinion regarding their behaviour. This attitude has caused much dispute with other Arabs over priorities such as in Lebanon or during the Iran-Iraq war and the second Gulf war against Iraq.

3) In general, the Syrians also do not see any contradiction between using force against certain Palestinian armed groups and fighting Israel; since the Palestinians are considered to be part of the Syrian "family". However, there is a deep feeling of sympathy towards ordinary Palestinians who are made to suffer, as happened in Jordan, Lebanon and more recently in Kuwait.

#### II - The Development of the Syrian position:

Up until the 1967 war, the overwhelming majority of Syrians, like all other Arabs, adopted the same rejectionist attitude towards the reality of Israel as a state. The main feature of the 1948-67 period was the wide gap found between the overall objective of destroying Israel and the lack of means to achieve it. Various rationalisations were put forward to explain away "the disaster". Nevertheless, at the time, this gap constrained Arab regimes to respond to highly emotional and irrational popular attitudes of total rejection. Such behaviour of Arab regimes led to the incorrect accusation by Israel and the West, that the Arab governments of the time were exploiting the Palestinian problem for legitimising purposes, in particular the Arab authoritarian regimes.\*\* The fact was, and remains to be, that the Palestinian problem and the Arab-Israeli conflict deeply affect the hearts and minds, and the very social fabric of every Arab society, especially in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

It should be crystal clear from the bloody history of the conflict that

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\*\* It is very peculiar to note that the advocates of this argument do not see the contradiction in their logic being that either Israel is besieged by a sea of hostility or not. The truth is that unless Israel does justice to the Palestinians and responds to Arab demands, neither democratic nor dictatorial regimes would be able to end the conflict.

the issues at stake go beyond the nature of the regimes in power. The role of domestic, political needs as an important factor behind initiating Arab wars and challenging Israeli deterrence regardless of the rational calculus of military balances, is a valid explanation of Arab behaviour.<sup>e</sup> From the Arab point of view, Israel strikes at the heart of their intrinsic interests and values whatever their political hues. The wars of 1947-49, 1967, 1969 and 1973 proved the correctness of this explanation.

Insofar as Syria is concerned, certain developments took place in 1964 which were to trigger off a chain of events that paved the way to the 1967 war. At the time, the Ba'athist regime was faced with Israeli plans to complete the diversion of the Jordan River waters; whilst it was militarily incapable of challenging Israel. In actual fact, it was an acute dilemma for the regime, since it was, after all, a revolutionary one which advocated in its slogans the radicalisation of Arab societies in order to destroy Israel. In the first instance, Syria called on other Arab states for assistance, in particular President Nasser of Egypt. However, as none were interested in a confrontation with Israel, the Syrian regime raised the slogan of "the popular war of national liberation". Thereby, it found a partner among the Palestinians, mainly the "Al-Fatah" group, which began sending infiltrators across the Syrian-Israeli borders in January 1965. Thus the regime thought that it was proving its credentials and responding to domestic needs. The chain of infiltrations and Israeli reprisals eventually culminated inadvertently in the war of 1967, when Nasser miscalculated his moves believing that he was able to deter Israel from threatening Syria without a war.\*\*\*

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\*\*\*Professor Stein does not read this episode on the Syrian side in this way. She attributes Syria's behaviour to the unpopularity of the regime and because of that, it resorted to foreign adventure. This mistaken view arises from inaccurate data. It is true that the regime was unpopular in the cities and among the middle classes, but it was very popular among the peasants who formed more than 70% of the population at the time. Moreover, during that time the Alawites did not dominate the regime, as it was in fact a coalition from all the rural regions. Lastly, the Palestinian infiltrations started in 1965 and not in 1966,

The 1967 defeat, which was named "the second disaster", was instrumental in the ascendance of President Assad, although it took him a great deal of further political manoeuvring to assume office in 1970. Assad's rise to power occurred against the backdrop of a fundamental change, at least among the majority of Syrians, in their perception of Israel. Even though the change took hold gradually among the politically articulate, three important conclusions were arrived at:

First, the technological gap between Israel and the Arabs had become so wide in every sphere, that it made the thesis of the annihilation of Israel an absurd proposition. This conclusion was further reinforced by the development of Israel's nuclear capability.

Second, in spite of Soviet support for the Arab side, the international community, particularly the superpowers, would not countenance the decisive defeat of Israel - let alone its disappearance.

Third, the slogan that "Arab unity" based on the so-called "revolutionary regimes" was a precondition to defeat Israel, was discredited.

The 1967 war has been generally regarded as a watershed in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, since it was to transform its type from a zero-sum game to a non-zero-sum one which combines both conflict and cooperation.<sup>7</sup> More importantly on the psychological level, the defeat corrected the dissonance in the Arab perception, although not overall, but at least in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and among the substantial majority of Palestinians. In other words, before the war, there was disharmony in the Arab cognition which was caused by the gap between rejecting the reality of Israel and the lack of means to obliterate the undesired object. Indeed, the paradox in this war is that while it confirmed Arab suspicions of an expansionist Israel, it was to move them

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and it was in response to the Jordan River problem, a fact which Professor Stein completely overlooks: see Janice Gross Stein, "The Security Dilemma in the Middle East: A Prognosis for the Decade Ahead", in The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World ed. by Bahgat Korany, Paul Noble and Rex Brynen ( London: Macmillan; 1993 ), pp.62-67.

to accept the fait accompli.

Undoubtedly, such transformation in the Arab and Syrian psyche enabled Assad to embark on a process to limit the foreign policy objectives towards Israel. First, he rejected the concept of "the popular war of national liberation", as being an effective strategy to fight Israel; and returned it to its proper place in classical, military traditions as an auxiliary strategy to conventional war.<sup>2</sup>

Second, he gradually introduced the notion of separating the political and military aspects of the conflict from its ideological dimension, namely, the antagonism between Zionism and Arab nationalism.

Third, he maintained that the urgent task was to contain Israeli expansion by liberating the Arab occupied territories in 1967. This was to signal his readiness to then accept UN Resolution 242 in 1971 and 1972.<sup>3</sup> - In doing so, Syria actually limited its objectives in the October War which was launched jointly with Egypt in 1973.

Fourth, on the Arab level, he improved Syria's relations with other Arab states in pursuance of "Arab solidarity" by discarding the division between "revolutionary regimes" and "conservative" ones.

Following the war, Syria agreed to UN Resolution 338 which implied acceptance of Resolution 242. It also accepted the resolutions of the sixth Arab summit in Algiers of 1973, which defined the phased objectives as: the liberation of the occupied territories since 1967, which included Arab Jerusalem, and the restoration of the national rights of the Palestinian people in accordance with the decisions of the PLO being its sole representative.<sup>4</sup> Even though from 1974 onwards the Ba'ath Party congresses have endorsed these objectives, it still retained the phrase, "the liberation of all the land of Palestine", in its resolutions. It

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<sup>2</sup>Up to that time Syria was strictly adhering to the resolutions of the Khartoum Arab summit of 1967 which set out the "three no's": "No negotiation, no recognition, no peace".

was only dropped from the resolutions of the 7th and 8th Regional Congresses of 1979 and 1985 respectively. Although, in the last 13th National Congress held in 1980, the phrase was kept.<sup>11</sup> The significance of omitting the phrase from the Syrian Regional Congresses is that even ideologically Syria is now prepared to coexist with a "Zionist" state and conduct the ideological facet of the conflict by peaceful means until there is a final resolution of it. In the distant future, this resolution could take various forms, such as a bi-national state or a regional community.

Such a step should not be dismissed lightly, since it does represent real progress on the road to finding a symbiosis between Zionism and Arab nationalism. This is the only way for a full and true peace to replace antagonism, in contrast to the formal and cold peace established between Egypt and Israel which set aside this thorny problem and ignored the Palestinian dimension. A case in point is when, in 1975, Assad hinted of signing a peace treaty,<sup>12</sup> and then had to retract it later on, as the 12th National Congress of 1975 rejected recognising Israel and signing a peace treaty with it.<sup>13</sup> Henceforward, the official line was that in return for full Israeli withdrawal, would there only be an end to the state of belligerency. In addition to the above-mentioned steps, Syria also agreed to the resolutions of the 12th Arab summit in Fez of 1982 which endorsed the concept of two states in the land of Palestine.<sup>14</sup>

### III - Joining the Peace Process:

If Syria has been incrementally internalising the idea of peaceful coexistence with a Zionist state, it has been very adamant, until recently, on the procedural conditions leading to a settlement. In 1973, it accepted the concept of an international conference under a joint American-Soviet chairmanship with the active participation of the UN; however, it did not attend the Geneva Conference of 1973 as no

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<sup>11</sup>In the National Congress, the Syrian Ba'athists do not have an overwhelming majority since it is a pan-Arab congress.



disengagement agreement was signed, unlike Egypt, and it was signed by Syria only in 1974. Although the United States continued its efforts to convene a further conference in 1977, it came to no avail, as the then Israeli government wrecked the joint Soviet-American agreement of October 1977 on holding the conference.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, Egypt went ahead on the path of a separate peace.

Syria was infuriated so much by this as to consider it an act of treachery. Although the ensuing ostracisation of Egypt from the Arab fold is past history now, the rationale behind Syria's opposition is worth restating so as to throw light on the present process. The raison d'être of an international conference was that the Arabs lacked negotiating power enough to compel Israel to agree to their demands; therefore, they needed an international balance to complement the regional one, in order to compensate for their weakness. Moreover, a separate peace not only undermined Arab negotiating power, but it also failed to address all the issues involved, particularly the core one, i.e., the Palestinian problem with all its ramifications. In a situation where there are refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, a satisfactory solution must be found for their status; hence Syria has always insisted on a comprehensive settlement.

On the signing of a separate peace between Egypt and Israel, Syria reverted to what is aptly called "tactical rejection".<sup>16</sup> It signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1980 and called for restoring the destabilised, regional "strategic balance" by adopting the doctrine of "strategic or military parity".<sup>17</sup> Added to the misfortunes of Syria, the Iran-Iraq war erupted in 1980 which shattered what was left of Arab solidarity. To further exacerbate the situation, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and clashed briefly with Syrian forces which suffered heavy losses, partly because the leadership misread Israeli intentions, whereby Syrian forces were not redeployed and augmented for defence. The situation marginally improved when Syria scored a victory in Lebanon in 1984 and thereby destroyed the Israeli-Lebanese Peace Agreement of 1983 and forced Israel to withdraw to the occupied security zone under the pressure of Palestinian and Lebanese

resistance. Despite this, Syria was still in no mood to talk peace, seeing itself in a very vulnerable position besieged on every side. Salvation came when the Iran-Iraq war came to a halt in 1988 which allowed Assad to mend his fences with other Arab states. Simultaneously, the United States showed interest in resuming contacts in response to the "Palestinian Uprising" in the occupied territories.

In parallel to these developments, the Cold War was disappearing from the world's horizon and with it the international balance on which Syria had so far heavily relied on to prop up its strategic posture. The Soviet Union under Gorbachev decided to redefine its regional interests in the Middle East and to move from confrontation to cooperation with the United States. Gorbachev also advised Assad to seek a "balance of interests" in place of "the strategic balance", a piece of advice which was not happily received.

In response, Assad had to adjust and thereby in 1989, he revived his favoured, regional axis of Saudi Arabia-Egypt-Syria. This alliance has served a range of Syrian interests; restoring good American-Syrian relations, as in the 1970's and restraining Israel, even though it burnt its fingers in Lebanon. But more significantly, it has undermined Iraqi attempts to isolate Syria in revenge for its pro-Iranian stand during the war, when it assisted the Lebanese Christian leader, Michel Aoun. Furthermore, Assad's conjecture was correct in that the Iraqi regime was financially desperate and feared military discontent at home after the disastrous war and consequently was looking for a foreign adventure; whereupon Kuwait was invaded. The invasion of Kuwait gave Syria the opportunity to cement the triple axis, and considerably improve American-Syrian understanding over Lebanon and to seek a settlement with Israel from a more favourable position, although not ideal.

Indeed, no sooner had the war against Iraq ended, that in March 1991, President Bush put forward his initiative for a modified version of the international peace conference. The initiative met some of the Syrian demands, namely, for a comprehensive settlement based on Resolutions 242 and 338 and the principle of "land for peace". It also recognised the

legitimate, political rights of the Palestinian people. Nevertheless, it was a far cry from what Syria previously insisted on with regard to the procedural rôle of the conference. The UN was relegated to an observer status and the conference was just an umbrella for bilateral negotiations with no preconditions accepted by Israel. Yet, it would have been futile to insist on a conference empowered with forcing a settlement since the Soviet counterweight had become virtually redundant.

What Assad hoped for was a balanced American position by exploiting the newly developed Arab-American nexus which was based on the coincidence of interests forged out of the coalition against Iraq. Therefore, it is clear that Syria agreed to the initiative under the pressure of regional and international changes which could not be manipulated to its advantage. In other words, the optimal conditions, namely, regional and international balances conducive to realising a settlement simply could not be materialised for the time being. Instead, Syria exploited the new factors and pinned its hopes on American "goodwill", a move which runs counter to the underlying principal of a balance of power based on equilibrium. What are, then, the chances of achieving a settlement in the context of a "new world order"?

#### IV - Syrian and Israeli Negotiating Positions:

When Syria joined the current peace process, it expressed the view that it did not have illusions about its chances of success in the short-term. It also considered the negotiations as another battle in the long-term struggle to contain Israeli expansion and to restore Arab rights.<sup>19</sup>

It should be borne in mind that the process began when the Likud government was in power in Israel. Despite the election in June 1992, which resulted in a Labour coalition government, the Syrian reaction was still not very optimistic.<sup>20</sup> This stems from the general opinion in Syria that both divides of Israeli politics are two faces of the same coin, though such an outlook was recently modified by Assad.<sup>21</sup>

However, in the three interviews which Assad gave prior to the Peace Conference in 1991, he made it clear that the peace process had a chance of success, even though it might take time. His prognosis was apparently based on the international, mainly American, and strong regional interests in achieving a settlement to stabilise the region. Moreover, while he insisted on full evacuation from the occupied territories and a comprehensive peace, he also maintained the prospects of reaching "a peace agreement" in the end. In the interim, confidence building measures could be examined on their merits but should exclude partial withdrawal as sufficient for full peace.<sup>22</sup>

When the new Israeli government accepted that Resolutions 242 and 338 were to be the basis for negotiations, the Syrian side tabled a position paper in September 1992, which was heralded as a breakthrough in the process. Although the paper has not been officially published, most of its key elements have subsequently transpired via Syrian sources. Basically, the paper outlines the Syrian position for a commitment by Israel to withdraw from all the occupied territories of 1967 in accordance with an agreed timetable, and for it to recognise the right of the Palestinians to self-determination and that security has to be mutual. In return, Syria would sign a peace agreement in the context of a comprehensive peace that would end the state of belligerency, recognise the legitimacy of Israel and of the international borders between the two sides.<sup>23</sup>

With regard to the normalisation of relations, namely, full diplomatic and economic links, Syria's view has not changed in that Resolution 242 does not require such an obligation to be fulfilled. This position explains why Syria still uses the term "peace agreement" instead of "treaty". However, it must be emphasised that the objective of normal, peaceful relations is not completely ruled out, but Syria considers that such a situation would only come about from Israel's commitment to full withdrawal, its implementation in the Golan Heights and when the Palestinians are satisfied with their progress.<sup>24</sup>

In the meantime, Israel has not yet accepted the principle of full withdrawal and has only alluded to partial withdrawal. Yet judging from the latest statements issued by the Israeli Prime Minister, Mr. Itzhak Rabin, Israel would consider full withdrawal from the Golan Heights in return for a full peace by declaring "the geographic dimension of withdrawal", being dependent on what Syria would offer and that a peace treaty should not be "linked to other negotiations".<sup>26</sup> Rabin's signal is quite obvious in that if Assad were to opt out and disengage Syria from the Palestinian problem, he may then obtain his objective like Egypt. At this juncture, it is worth noting that Rabin has shifted his priority to Syria, in contrast to his pre-election campaign whereby he stated that he would first concentrate on Palestinian autonomy. Subsequently, he has admitted that he had underestimated the problems involved.<sup>26</sup> At the time, Syria repeated its usual position by demanding a complete settlement, although this position would not exclude progress at varying rates on the different fronts owing to the nature of the issues involved.<sup>27</sup>

#### V - Evaluation of the Process:

One useful method to evaluate the prospects for reaching a settlement is to compare and contrast the present process with what happened in the case of Egypt and Israel. Professor Stein has proposed an explanatory model which can be helpful in segregating and understanding the rôle of various factors required for concluding a peace agreement. Primarily, she maintains that there are two environmental variables: the intensity of competition among the external powers and an aversion towards war, and a third variable derived from the bargaining theory, being the function of the United States as a mediator.<sup>28</sup> Further on, she adds a fourth variable, being economic pressure, although she is not sure about its impact.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, Stein has actually overlooked two important variables which played a crucial part in facilitating an agreement between Egypt and Israel. First, was the advantage that accrued to Israel from concluding a separate peace treaty with Egypt which thereby weakened the bargaining

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power of the other Arab parties. The second variable was the comparative value of the Sinai desert as either being a buffer zone to absorb an attack or a geographic early-warning span.<sup>20</sup> If one then takes all these factors into account, to find out whether they operate or not, and if so, then what of their function, one would be in a better position to deduce the chances of success in the current negotiations.

First, Stein maintains that when Sadat cut out the Soviet Union from negotiations, he managed to extricate the Egyptian-Israeli strategic relationship from the competition of the external powers. This thesis is supported by Professors Cantori and Spiegel, in their generalisation that "...it is easier to impose conflict than cooperation upon the members of a subordinate system," by the powers of the prime system.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Professor Buzan also asserts that "...competing external powers will therefore generally reinforce rather than change the existing pattern of local hostilities." However, he cites an exception when "...external powers resort to direct overlay of the local [security] complex," to change these patterns, and he offers the example of peace between Egypt and Israel to illustrate this point.<sup>22</sup> If this is taken as the logical conclusion of the argument, then it is highly unlikely that Syria would accept full American domination as a price.

The main question here is really whether such generalisations are valid in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and since the rivalry of external powers has died down with the demise of the Cold War, for the time being at least, shall this fact help the peace process? The problem with all such generalisations is that they do not take into account the special and complex characteristics of the conflict.

1) - There is an in-built western, and in particular American, bias in favour of Israel, basically owing to their cultural links.

11) - In general, the Arabs are regarded as hostile, or potentially hostile to western interests. There are certain cases of coincidence of interests which mitigate from this view, such as the Syrian-American understanding over Lebanon, and over the Iran-Iraq war and also the second Gulf war which involved the West, the Arab Gulf states, Syria and

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Egypt against Iraq. Thus, the argument that Israel has lost its strategic value to western interests is valid only insofar as the ex-Soviet policies.

iii) - The Palestinian problem is not an inter-state conflict, it is an intra-state one between two peoples, where the Palestinians demand their natural right for statehood. This conflict is an essential part of the general Arab-Israeli one.

iv) - In the Arab-Israeli equation, the Arab side is weaker on the international and military levels, which has required it to have a balancing support so that it can negotiate on an equal basis.

Hence, it is too early to reach a definite conclusion whether the absence of rivalry on the part of the external powers in the Middle East is a causal factor which will achieve a settlement responsive to Arab demands. At best, one could argue that such absence might be an intervening variable, if the United States is willing to balance its interests.

Second, insofar as the aversion towards war and on the use of force in general, there is no clearly defined position. It must be noted that the Palestinians do not have the potential for a conventional war. The maximum threat they are able to pose, is a type of war of attrition against which Israeli society seems to be bearing quite well. Indeed, there have been even more demands to become more ruthless in order to suppress the uprising.

With regard to Syria, three Israeli positions can be identified. Some Israelis are not averse to having another war with Syria so that it might be forced to give up the Golan Heights once and for all. In contrast, some Israelis, particularly in the military establishment, do not view that such an objective justifies the costs involved. In the middle, which seems to be the stand taken by the present government,<sup>33</sup> the line of thinking is that if Syria is incapable of launching a war on its own now, Israel can afford to wait in order to extract the right concessions.

On the other hand, Syria, being weaker militarily, would prefer to achieve its objectives by diplomatic means. But there is a bottom line which any regime cannot afford to cross and for Syria that is the return of all the Golan Heights.<sup>24</sup> The alternative is of course the continuation of conflict which carries the possibility of another war in the future. In the light of Syria's continuing efforts to modernise and augment its military capabilities, it seems that the utility of threat and use of force has not been completely abandoned in its strategic thinking should the process fail. A limited-liability war to liberate the Golan Heights is not beyond the realm of possibilities, even though the Russians are not currently providing the military hardware the Syrians require, or they are supplying them but at a slower rate for hard cash and until past debts are settled.

Whether the strategic doctrine is called "parity" or "defence sufficiency" is all the same, for in the end, what matters is a certain order of battle relative to the objective, with a favourable and supportive regional configuration of power. This situation could allow Syria to sustain a short war for up to a week, regardless of whether such a war would arrive at a decisive victory for either side. Thus, it is the possession of the appropriate capabilities and a willingness to resort to force by Syria which would paradoxically make Israel give up the Golan Heights. Thus, an aversion towards war could then be engendered among a wide spectrum of Israelis. This is because there is a difference in the relative value assigned to holding this piece of territory. For Syria, it is an intrinsic interest which it will fight for, whatever the time-scale and circumstance, whereas for Israel, it is an advantage for bargaining full peace, regardless of the security and military considerations it claims to provide.

Third, the Golan Heights with its average width of 20 km does not offer a buffer zone, like Sinai, to absorb a surprise attack if Syria's intentions - provided it had the capability - were to attack Israel proper, i.e. within the 1967 borders. However, it is very doubtful that it does possess such a capability, or will ever have, bearing in mind the technological gap between the two sides. Their value as a geographic



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early-warning distance is also very limited, unless they are completely demilitarised and sophisticated monitoring stations are installed, in addition to the presence of a barrier of multinational forces under UN command. Syria seems willing to accept the latter situation, although this factor is secondary compared to the real intentions of Syria as to whether it has reconciled itself to the legitimacy of the state of Israel. It has done that and it has also accepted equal and mutual security for both sides.

Fourth, the economic argument does not apply in the case of Syria, even if it was valid for Egypt, as Professor Stein maintains. The reasons are briefly that Syria does not suffer an overpopulation problem, and that it has sufficient resources to support its 13 million population, not to mention its latest discovery of oil and especially natural gas. In actual fact, Syria suffers from a mismanagement and misallocation of resources, as is often the case in third world countries, but not a lack of resources. It did endure a period of hardship in the middle eighties owing to drought, but it has since recovered considerably.<sup>25</sup> Over and above these factors, the Palestinian problem and security considerations take priority over any economic factor in Syria, out of necessity and not choice, since it is in the heart of the conflict which directly affects its stability and security.<sup>26</sup>

Fifth, there is no question that Syria will succumb to the temptation of a separate peace, as in the case of Egypt. The reasons for this are essentially ideological, domestic and self-interest which are interrelated. Ideologically, Assad has established his prestige and status as a defender of Arab rights against Israel and any betrayal of the Palestinians would damage his stature on the Arab level beyond repair. Domestically, as indicated above, the Palestinian cause is an

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<sup>25</sup>Professor Moshe Ma'oz's argument that economic reasons made Syria accept the peace process is not valid, not only because of the reasons outlined above, but also because it receives economic aid from the Arab Gulf States to support its defence efforts; see "Syrian-Israeli Relations and the Middle East Process." The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations, V.14, No 3 (September, 1992), pp.8-9.

article of faith in Syria. However authoritarian the regime is, there is a limit beyond which a ruler cannot defy in the national ethos of his people except at his own political peril and cost. Besides which, there are over two million Palestinians living in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon who form an important factor in the stability of the three states, in which their presence introduces an objective linkage to the conflict. Therefore, even if it is not out of Assad's beliefs as an Arab nationalist, it is because of his regime's self-interest that he has to cooperate with the other Arab parties to reach a comprehensive settlement according to their pledges.

One qualification to this argument is that the peace process is based on coordinating separate tracks which while it preserves the interconnectedness of the issues, it still allows each Arab party leeway in the negotiations. In other words, they are tactically free to reach the same strategic objective. Hence, it could be assumed that if the Palestinian side were to declare that it is satisfied with the progress it has achieved, this would leave Syria in a position to conclude an agreement.

Sixth, the current rôle of the United States as a mediator is different from the Egyptian-Israeli case in many respects. At the time, both sides sought its influence and power to mediate, coerce and offer financial rewards. To date, Israel has reacted negatively to Arab calls for active American involvement. The complications of the Palestinian problem, on various levels and to all sides, might possibly militate against powerful American participation. Although, it might be possible in the case of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, if Israel were willing to entertain such a forceful rôle, but this remains to be seen.

The Clinton Administration has pledged to be a "full partner" which signifies "a powerful and an active rôle", and also an "honest broker", but it will not be an "arbitor" or try "to dictate" the terms.<sup>26</sup> What

this is supposed to imply on a practical level is obviously subject to circumstances. Assad, on the other hand, has reminded the new Administration of the need to balance its interests in the region and praised ex-President Bush and his Secretary of State, James Baker for their efforts to initiate the process.<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that there is a useful spin-off from the negotiations to maintain American-Syrian cooperation on other regional issues.

Conclusion:

It has been demonstrated that Syria has reconciled itself incrementally to accept the reality of Israel and shown its readiness to establish peaceful and normal relations. The latter will only arise if a comprehensive and just settlement is reached and a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights is implemented, to ensure that the psychological balance is restored. To compare the current process with what happened between Egypt and Israel is rather misleading owing to the different factors and issues involved, whereby the present negotiations are dealing with the heart of the conflict which is the Palestinian problem in addition to occupation.

The pivotal question is whether the conflict is ripe for a settlement, the answer to which is a qualified yes. The reason for this conditional optimism is that the forces which support its achievement have gained enough in strength on the Arab side; although it might take some time to gather momentum in Israel and possibly entail another war. The key factor which would determine the success of the negotiations would be when Israel is prepared to divest its overall maximal concept of security from its territorial dimension in exchange for full peace. Only then, would the Arabs be more secure and likewise be deprived of the motivation to persist with the conflict and also, intermittently, to challenge Israel's deterrence.

It seems that Israel's negotiating strategy reveals two interrelated misconceptions. First, that the Arabs are in a dire, vulnerable strategic state which might drive them to surrender on part of their

demands, and second, that, Israel hopes that, in time, one of the Arab parties might defect and sign a separate deal. It must be stressed that for Syria and the other Arab parties involved, a full withdrawal and self-determination for the Palestinians are the sine qua non for peace. Concessions on these points would be suicidal for Arab leaders and regimes.

It would be tragic if the more perceptive of Israeli leaders and strategists were to delude themselves with the temporary military weakness of the Arabs owing to the regional and international environmental changes. Relationships of power, throughout history, are dynamic and not static. In any case, the issue is no longer the destruction of Israel, but only of limited-liability wars which are not beyond the reach of the capability of the Arabs, particularly Syria. Hence, the price of failure in the process, is the continuation of the conflict which is not subject to the operation of military superiority alone. It is clear that Israel can still inflict limited military defeats on the Arabs, but short of using nuclear weapons, it is not in a position to impose strategic surrender upon them.<sup>24</sup> There are two interconnected reasons for this stalemate: First, Israel cannot muster sufficient conventional military resources for such an objective; and, second, as a result of the opposition from the external powers owing to their vital interests in the Middle East. This margin of manoeuvre afforded by the Israeli security dilemma, a matter which most Israeli strategists are aware of, enables the Arabs to continue with the conflict.

Moreover, the main lesson to be drawn from previous Arab-Israeli wars is that they did not necessarily happen within the context of the rational exegesis of military balances. The prime motivating factors were the pressure of domestic political constraints and perception of Israeli threats to Arab intrinsic interests, bearing in mind the cultural bias that affects to some extent the rational calculus of cost/benefit.

In conclusion, a peaceful settlement cannot be materialised as long as Israel strongly adheres to the notion that the status quo is optimal for

its security. A settlement needs to break out of the security dilemma between the two sides which arises from the maximal, Israeli concept of security which in turn causes Arab insecurity. Thus, general deterrence and reassurance can provide stability and conflict management on the road to the resolution of the conflict.<sup>32</sup>

Notes

- 1 - See Y. Harkabi, Arab Attitudes to Israel. Translated by Misha Louvish (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1972), chs.2, 3 and 4 ; and Walid Khalidi, Palestine Reborn (London: I.B.Tauris & Co.Ltd., 1992), ch.1.
- 2 - Henry Cattan, The Palestine Question (London: Croom Helm, 1988), ch.6.
- 3 - Peter Mansfield, A History of the Middle East (London: Viking, 1991), p.181; and Daniel Pipes, Greater Syria, p.27.
- 4 - Rashid Khalidi, et al. eds., The Origins of Arab Nationalism (New York: Colombia University Press, 1991), chs.2 and 3; and Hizb al-Ba'ath Al-Arabi, Al-Ishtirāki, Al-Qiyādh Al-Qawmiyh, Nidal Hizb Al-Ba'ath Al-Arabi Al Ishtirāki, 1943-1975. (The Struggle of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party) (Damascus, 1978), ch.1.
- 5 - M.Z.Diab, "Syria's objectives and its concepts of Deterrence, Defence and Security", in Regional Security in the Middle East: Arab and Israeli Concepts of Deterrence and Defence, ed. by David Wurmser (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, forthcoming 1993).
- 6 - See Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Beyond Deterrence". Journal of Social Issues, V.43, No.4 (1987), pp.5-15.
- 7 - Thomas C.Schelling, The Strategy of Conflict. (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p.83; and M.Z.Diab, "A proposed Security Regime for and Arab-Israeli settlement", in The Arab-Israeli Search for Peace, ed. by Steven L.Spiegel (Boulder, Col.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), pp.159-65.
- 8 - Hizb Al-Ba'ath Al-Arabi Al-Ishtirāki, Al Qiyādh Al Qawmiyh, Maktab Al-Thaqaf, wal Idad Al-Hizbi, Al-Haraka Al-Tasshihya: Min Al-Mu'tamar Al-Qawmi Al-Asher Al-Isthnāi ilā Al-Mu'tamar Al-Qawmi Al-Thālith Asher, 1970 - 1980 [The Corrective Movement: From the Extraordinary Tenth National Congress to the Thirteenth National

- Congress] (Damascus, 1983), p.16. Hereafter the source is cited as The Corrective Movement.
- 9 - See Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, Syria and the Middle East Peace Process (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991), pp.105-6; and Moshe Ma'oz, Assad: The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988), p.85.
- 10- The Corrective Movement, p.145.
- 11- Ibid., p.296.
- 12- Newsweek, 3 March 1975, cited in Ma'oz, op.cit., p.98.
- 13- The Corrective Movement, pp.190-91.
- 14- Survival, V.14, No.6 (Nov./Dec., 1982) pp.282-83.
- 15- Charles D. Smith, Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, (2nd ed., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp.253-54.
- 16- Drysdale and Hinnebusch, op.cit., pp.129-35.
- 17- See Efraim Karsh, "The Rise and Fall of Syria's Quest for Strategic Parity", in RUSSELL & BRASSEY'S DEFENCE YEARBOOK, 1991, (London: Brassey's, 1991), pp.197-216; Ahmed S. Khalidi and Hussein Agha, "The Syrian Doctrine of Strategic Parity", in The Middle East in Global Perspective, ed. by Judith Kipper and Harold H. Saunders (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1991), pp.186-218, and M.Z. Diab, op.cit.
- 18- Efraim Karsh, op.cit.; and M.Z. Diab, op.cit.
- 19- Hizb Al-Ba'ath Al-Arabi Al-Ishtiraki, Al Qiyadh Al-Qawmiyah, Ta'mim No.556 (Circular), 26 October, 1991, pp.1-2.
- 20- Tichreen, (Damascus), 1 July, 1992, p.1.
- 21- Assad's interview, Time, 30 November, 1992, pp.41-42.
- 22- Assad's interviews on 29 July, 1991, Newsweek, 5 August, 1991, pp.16-17; to ABC on 19 September, 1991, Al-Rayeh(Beirut), 7 October, 1991, pp.24-29; and to CNN, on 27 October, 1991, FBIS, 91-209, 29 October, 1991, pp.44-48.
- 23- Al-Hayat, (London), 30 October, 1992, p.5; see also the joint statement by the Arab negotiating parties of 25 July, 1992 in Al-Ba'ath, (Damascus), 26 July, 1992, pp.1, 10.
- 24- Al-Hayat, 20 November, 1992, p.5; and the Independent, (London), 26 November, 1992, p.14.
- 25- Al-Hayat, 5 and 11 March, 1993, p.5; and International Herald Tribune, (Paris), 13-14 March, 1993, p.3.

- 26- International Herald Tribune, 17 February, 1993, p.5.
- 27- Time, 30 November, 1992, pp.41-42.
- 28- Janice Gross Stein, "The Alchemy of Peacemaking: The Prerequisites and Corequisites of Progress in the Arab-Israeli Conflict". International Journal, V.38, No.4 (Autumn, 1983), pp.531-55.
- 29- Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Preventing War in the Middle East: When do Deterrence and Reassurance work?", in Conflict Management in the Middle East, ed. by Steven L. Spiegel (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1992), pp.41-43.
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- 32- Barry Buzan, People, States and Fear, (2nd. ed.; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp.214-15.
- 33- Rabin's interview, Time, 30 November, 1992, pp.42-43.
- 34- Assad's interview, Ibid., pp.41-42.
- 35- Drysdale and Hinnebusch, op.cit., pp.43-53.
- 36- International Herald Tribune, 22 February, 1993, p.4; and Al-Hayat, 5 and 11 March, 1993, pp.1,4.
- 37- Assad's interview, Time, op.cit.
- 38- Israel Tal, "Israeli Security in the Eighties", The Jerusalem Quarterly, No.17 (Fall, 1980), p.14.
- 39- For these concepts, see Richard Ned Lebow, Janice Gross Stein, "Beyond Deterrence", op.cit., pp.40-63; and "Preventing War in the Middle East: When do Deterrence and Reassurance work?", op.cit., pp.29-53. However, the two authors do not make the distinction between the concepts of a settlement and conflict resolution which is required in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict because of the ideological antagonism involved.



- Congress] (Damascus, 1983), p.16. Hereafter the source is cited as The Corrective Movement.
- 9 - See Alasdair Drysdale and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, Syria and the Middle East Peace Process (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1991), pp.105-6; and Moshe Ma'oz, Assad: The Sphinx of Damascus: A Political Biography, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988), p.85.
- 10- The Corrective Movement, p.145.
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- 13- The Corrective Movement, pp.190-91.
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- 17- See Efraim Karsh, "The Rise and Fall of Syria's Quest for Strategic Parity", in RUSSELL & BRASSEY'S DEFENCE YEARBOOK, 1991, (London: Brassey's, 1991), pp.197-216; Ahmed S. Khalidi and Hussein Agha, "The Syrian Doctrine of Strategic Parity", in The Middle East in Global Perspective, ed. by Judith Kipper and Harold H. Saunders (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1991), pp.186-218, and M.Z. Diab, op.cit.
- 18- Efraim Karsh, op.cit.; and M.Z. Diab, op.cit.
- 19- Hizb Al-Ba'ath Al-Arabi Al-Ishtiraki, Al Qiyadh Al-Qawmiyah, Ta'mim No.556 [Circular], 26 October, 1991, pp.1-2.
- 20- Tichreen, (Damascus), 1 July, 1992, p.1.
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- 23- Al-Hayat, (London), 30 October, 1992, p.5; see also the joint statement by the Arab negotiating parties of 25 July, 1992 in Al-Ba'ath, (Damascus), 26 July, 1992, pp.1, 10.
- 24- Al-Hayat, 20 November, 1992, p.5; and the Independent, (London), 26 November, 1992, p.14.
- 25- Al-Hayat, 5 and 11 March, 1993, p.5; and International Herald Tribune, (Paris), 13-14 March, 1993, p.3.