

The Executive Memorandum

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PROMOTING MIDDLE EAST PEACE AFTER THE JORDAN-ISRAEL PEACE TREATY

President Bill Clinton is in the Middle East this week for brief visits to Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. The centerpiece of his trip is today's signing of the Jordanian-Israeli Peace Treaty in a ceremony on the Jordan-Israel border. The treaty is noteworthy at a time when the prospects for peace have been clouded by rising terrorism against Israel by Palestinian Islamic radicals.

Terrorism is the chief obstacle to building Arab-Israeli peace. Therefore it is distressing that President Clinton has chosen to reward one of the world's foremost supporters of terrorism, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, with a presidential visit. Syria is one of the seven countries on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism. Previous American Presidents have kept Assad at arm's length, with the exception of Richard Nixon, who visited Damascus in 1974. Jimmy Carter in 1977 and George Bush in 1990 met the Syrian dictator in Geneva, a neutral site.

Clinton himself met with Assad in Geneva on January 16, 1994, in an effort to spur progress in the deadlocked Syrian-Israeli negotiations. At that time, Assad pleased U.S. officials by claiming to have chosen peace as a "strategic option." But Assad has done little since January to transform that "option" into a reality. Although Syria has made efforts to bolster its image in the West, by permitting the long-promised emigration of Syrian Jews for example, Assad has not budged from his demands for a total Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, which Israel occupied during its 1967 military defeat of Syria.

Clinton's trip to Damascus is a major mistake. His eagerness to woo Syria may inflate Assad's expectations about the concessions he can extract from Israel and the U.S. Clinton's unseemly diplomatic pilgrimage to Damascus may even lead Assad to conclude that he can improve relations with Washington and gain a one-sided settlement with Israel without halting his support of terrorism. Clinton should have ruled out a trip to Damascus until Assad ended his support for terrorism and expelled terrorists from Syria and Syrian-controlled areas in Lebanon.

There is much Clinton can do to promote Middle East peace and safeguard American interests in the region after the Jordanian-Israeli summit. Clinton should:

- ✓ **Press the Palestine Liberation Organization to crack down on anti-Israel terrorism.** Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Organization, is using terrorism to disrupt peace negotiations and destroy the fragile consensus among Palestinians and Israelis who support compromise. Hamas this month launched three terrorist attacks in eleven days, culminating in the October 19 suicide bombing of a bus in Tel Aviv that killed 23 people. Clinton must convince PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat to take strong actions to dismantle the Hamas terrorist network. If Arafat cannot control terrorism, then Israel will have little incentive to continue negotiating with him. Clinton should threaten to withhold American economic support for the Palestinians and block other sources of international economic support unless Arafat abides by his commitment under the September 13, 1993 Israel-PLO agreement to cooperate with Israel in combating terrorism.

- ✓ **Support Israeli efforts to defeat terrorism.** Too often in the past, Washington has constrained Jerusalem's response to terrorist attacks for fear of disrupting the peace process. As a result, Israel has become a hostage of the peace process, while its Arab interlocutors have been either unable or unwilling to take steps to prevent anti-Israeli terrorist attacks. The recent spate of terrorist outrages is endangering Israeli public support for further negotiations. Unless Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's government quickly restores Israeli confidence that continued peace negotiations are compatible with Israel's security needs, negotiations will become politically unsustainable. The Clinton Administration should support a strong Israeli response to terrorism, possibly including raids against Hamas camps in Gaza. This will increase pressure on the PLO to confront Hamas, if only to avoid Israeli interventions in PLO-controlled territory.
- ✓ **Push Syria to abandon terrorism and negotiate in good faith with Israel.** President Assad has given sanctuary and support to ten radical Palestinian groups opposed to peace with Israel, including Hamas, which is allowed to make radio broadcasts from Syrian territory. Damascus also supports Hezbollah (Party of God), the radical Iranian-inspired Lebanese Shiite terrorist group which was responsible for the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut and continues to launch rocket attacks against Israel from southern Lebanon. The Clinton Administration should insist that Assad halt his support of these groups and expel them from Syrian-controlled territory. Washington also should press Assad to enter secret bilateral talks with Israel, the formula that has resulted in diplomatic breakthroughs with Egypt, Jordan, and the PLO.
- ✓ **Rethink proposed peacekeeping arrangements on the Golan Heights.** The Clinton Administration should back away from its tentative pledge to commit U.S. peacekeeping troops on the Golan Heights as a way of encouraging an Israel-Syria peace treaty. The Hamas terrorist offensive has underscored some of the security risks that would persist long after a Syrian-Israeli agreement. Moreover, the Clinton Administration must reevaluate the risks of overcommitting U.S. forces to open-ended peacekeeping missions at a time of steadily shrinking defense budgets. Each soldier committed to Golan peacekeeping duties would require two or three others to be committed for future rotations. This not only would interfere with training and reduce combat readiness, but it could reduce the flexibility of American responses in future crises elsewhere. And this decline in American defense preparedness would result in only a minor increase in Israeli security. If peacekeeping troops are required to conclude an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement, the Administration should call for non-U.S. troops to do the job.

The peace treaty between Jordan and Israel is a valuable building block for Middle East peace. But if the impasses on the Syrian and Palestinian negotiating tracks are to be broken, the U.S. must press Hafez al-Assad and Yasser Arafat to decisively reject terrorism and to cooperate with Israel to contain it.

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