



Backgroundunder

Executive Summary

No. 1345

February 4, 2000

WASHINGTON'S ROLE IN THE SYRIAN–ISRAELI PEACE TALKS: DO'S AND DON'TS

JAMES PHILLIPS

The Syrian–Israeli peace negotiations, currently frozen because of a procedural impasse and continued terrorist attacks against Israel, offer Washington a chance to end the state of war between Israel and its most dangerous neighbor. But this opportunity is fraught with risks for both Israel and the United States.

Syrian President Hafez al-Assad demands the unconditional return of the Golan Heights, a strategic buffer zone that Israel has occupied since its victory in the 1967 Arab–Israeli War. Israel cannot surrender such a strategic asset without numerous security conditions, some of which are unacceptable to Syria. The Clinton Administration is trying to bridge the gaps between the two sides. It has promised to deliver economic aid and security guarantees, possibly including U.S. peacekeeping troops on the Golan, as inducements for both sides to sign a peace treaty.

While helping to shape a peace settlement between Israel and Syria, Washington must be careful not to undermine its ally's long-term security. A stable peace is not possible without a strong security foundation. If Israel decides to relinquish the Golan Heights, this is its prerogative; but the United States should not pressure it to do so. Nor should it lull the Israelis to sleep about the risks of

withdrawing from the Golan by providing a cosmetic U.S. peacekeeping presence that would do little to lessen Israel's security risks but would reduce the ability of U.S. armed forces to meet security challenges elsewhere.

The United States also should assert its own national interests in shaping a peace settlement by insisting that Syria actively support U.S. foreign policy goals outside of the peace process as a condition of receiving American foreign aid. Washington should not reward Damascus with foreign aid merely for signing a peace treaty that is in Syria's own interest. Syria should be required to take concrete actions to crack down systematically on all terrorists it supports, help contain Iraq, help isolate Iran, stop its support for drug smuggling and counterfeiting, and help build a stable and

Produced by
The Kathryn and Shelby
Cullom Davis Institute for
International Studies

Published by
The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C.
20002–4999
(202) 546–4400
<http://www.heritage.org>



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independent Lebanon before receiving one dollar of U.S. foreign aid.

The Clinton Administration's role in the Syrian-Israeli peace talks in the future should be conducted carefully, in accordance with the following do's and don'ts.

What Washington Should Do:

- **Work** for a peace settlement that minimizes Israel's long-term security risks.
- **Help** compensate Israel for the loss of the Golan Heights.
- **Require** Syria to crack down systematically on terrorists.
- **Require** Syria to end its strategic cooperation with Iran and halt the flow of Iranian supplies to the radical Shiite Hezbollah militia in Lebanon.
- **Require** Syria to end its support for drug smuggling and counterfeiting operations in Lebanon.

- **Require** Syria to assist in containing Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.
- **Work** to build a stable, independent Lebanon.
- **Consult** with Congress before making any commitments.

What Washington Should Not Do:

- **Do not commit** U.S. peacekeeping troops to the Golan Heights.
- **Do not push** Israel into any settlement that it believes would undermine its security.
- **Do not rush** the negotiations needlessly.
- **Do not give** foreign aid to Syria merely as a reward for peace.
- **Do not give** U.S. arms to Syria.

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JAMES PHILLIPS

The U.S.-sponsored Syrian–Israeli peace negotiations, currently frozen because of a procedural impasse and continued terrorist attacks against Israel, offer Washington an opportunity to help end the state of war between Israel and its most formidable remaining Arab adversary. But this opportunity is replete with risks, both for Israel and the United States.

Syrian President Hafez al-Assad has demanded the unconditional return of the Golan Heights, a strategic buffer zone that Israel has occupied since its victory in the 1967 Arab–Israeli war. Israel cannot afford to surrender any part of such an important strategic asset without numerous security conditions, some of which are unacceptable to Damascus. It would be wrong for Washington to press Israel—America's close ally—to make concessions on these matters if Israel believes its long-term security is threatened. A stable peace is impossible without a strong security foundation.

The United States should not be shy about asserting its own national interests while it helps to shape a Syrian–Israeli peace settlement. It should firmly press Assad to cooperate in advancing the American agenda in the Middle East and not succumb to tunnel vision about the peace process by subordinating all other U.S. foreign policy goals to

the goal of keeping the Syrian–Israeli talks on track.

Washington should demand that Syria end its support of terrorism and systematically crack down on terrorists based in Syria and Syrian-controlled Lebanon, end its support for drug smuggling, actively support U.S. efforts to contain Iraq and isolate Iran, and cooperate in building a stable and independent Lebanon. Only if Syria supports these goals with concrete actions, not just lip service, should the Administration promise foreign aid to Damascus.

The Administration also should rule out the commitment of U.S. peacekeeping troops to the Golan Heights. Not only would such a commitment undermine America's ability to meet its secu-

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rity challenges elsewhere, but it would mask the significant military risks inherent in returning the region to Syria, which has fought three wars with Israel. The United States cannot afford an open-ended deployment of combat troops to support a thinly disguised diplomatic gambit. Israel may decide to give the Golan back to Syria, and that is its prerogative; but it should do so without expecting the United States to commit its troops to keep the peace. Many other nations would be willing to provide peacekeeping forces if that is deemed necessary.

STANDOFF AT SHEPHERDSTOWN

The latest round of Syrian–Israeli negotiations, conducted in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, from January 3–9, quickly became mired in procedural disputes. The Syrian delegation led by Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa insisted that the question of borders be addressed first, while the Israeli delegation led by Prime Minister Ehud Barak demanded that the initial negotiations consider security arrangements and the normalization of bilateral relations. The United States eventually finessed the issue by suggesting that informal talks on the border issue precede formal talks on security issues, after which both issues would be addressed simultaneously.

This procedural impasse, which almost derailed the talks on the second day, reflects a fundamental disagreement: Syria insists rigidly on the unconditional return of all of the Golan Heights, while Israel maintains that it cannot commit to a total withdrawal from the region until it ascertains what kind of security arrangements and peace would follow. With prompting from Washington, working groups were formed to address four sets of crucial issues: the delineation of the border, security arrangements, the normalization of bilateral relations, and water rights.

Despite the active involvement of President Bill Clinton, who traveled from Washington to make five appearances during the seven days of talks, there was little substantive progress. On January 7, as the talks wound down, Washington submitted a working paper summarizing the U.S. view of the

areas of agreement and disagreement. This seven-page document, described as a “road map” by American officials, revealed continued disagreements over the following issues:

- **Borders.** Syria insists on a return to the de facto border that existed on June 4, 1967, the eve of the 1967 Arab–Israeli war. Israel demands modifications of this border based on security considerations and the fact that the border at that time included territory that Syria had seized by force during the 1948 Arab–Israeli war.
- **Security arrangements.** Israel insists on the establishment of a demilitarized zone in all of the territory from which it withdraws, in addition to the existing demilitarized zone established in the 1974 disengagement agreement after the 1973 Arab–Israeli war. Syria demands that any demilitarized zone be of equal scope on both sides of the border. Israel also calls for retention of its early warning facilities on Mount Hermon, the highest point on the Golan plateau. Syria wants such early warning facilities to be operated under the auspices of the United States and France. Israel wants security arrangements to be monitored by both sides in cooperation with a multinational force, while Syria prefers an international peacekeeping presence.
- **Water issues.** Most of the Golan’s rivers drain into the Sea of Galilee, Israel’s largest reservoir, which furnishes roughly 30 percent of Israel’s water supplies. Israel seeks continued access to Golan water at its current level of use, with measures to prevent contamination, pollution, or depletion of water supplies. Syria maintains that arrangements regarding Israel’s access to water must be mutually agreeable.

In addition to procedural impasses and substantive disagreements, the Shepherdstown talks were marred by arrogance on the part of the Syrian delegation. Foreign Minister Sharaa went out of his way to snub the Israeli delegation. Sharaa refused to shake hands with his Israeli counterpart, for example, and even avoided meeting with the Israelis unless President Clinton also was in the

room. The Assad regime's palpable hostility toward Israel and its disdain for public diplomacy suggest that even if a Syrian–Israeli peace accord is concluded, it will produce “the Mother of all Cold Peaces,” in the words of one Israeli with extensive experience in negotiating with the Syrians.¹

This implacable approach to peace negotiations presents a considerable political problem for Israeli Prime Minister Barak. He is committed to submit any peace agreement with Syria for a public referendum. Yet Israelis understandably distrust the Assad dictatorship, which launched a surprise attack on Israel during the 1973 Arab–Israeli war and has supported terrorist attacks against Israel since gaining power 30 years ago.

According to a recent poll, more than 60 percent of Israelis oppose trading the Golan for peace with Syria.² When Barak returned to Israel from Shepherdstown on January 10, he was greeted by over 100,000 Israelis demonstrating in Tel Aviv against a withdrawal from the Golan. A withdraw from the Golan also is opposed by two ministers in his own cabinet.

Even Israeli peace activists have doubts about relinquishing the Golan. Amos Oz, one of Israel's most prominent doves, has complained about the Syrians: “They think that we will give them the Golan and they will send us a receipt by fax. That is not good enough for me. If it continues like this it will be difficult to convince Israelis in a referendum—including me.”³

The Barak government is suspected of trying to reassure Israelis and build public support for a peace treaty with Syria by leaking the text of the American working paper to the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, which published it on January 13.⁴ The leak helped the Barak government both by

demonstrating how hard it was pushing at the negotiations to protect Israel's interests and by revealing that Syria already has accepted “normalized” relations with Israel. This Syrian promise, easily reversible, is by no means a guarantee of good relations if a peace treaty is signed. But the leak helped Barak soften Israeli public opinion by suggesting that despite the lack of public signs of a genuine reconciliation on Syria's part, the Syrians were open to improved relations with Israel.

On the other hand, the leak of the American working paper was potentially embarrassing for Damascus. It suggested that Assad had agreed to normalize relations before the border issue was resolved and that he was prepared to accept something less than the June 4, 1967, border—a prospect that he has rejected adamantly. Assad responded by suspending the negotiations. He no doubt hopes that this will encourage the Clinton Administration to pressure Israel into accepting his demands.

Assad also continues to pressure Israel by enabling Hezbollah (Party of God) terrorists based in Lebanon to attack Israeli forces in the security zone Israel imposed along the Lebanese side of its northern border. After a Hezbollah attack killed 3 Israeli soldiers, Prime Minister Barak announced on February 1 that negotiations with Syria would not be resumed until Damascus reins in Hezbollah.

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

The negotiations, if and when they resume, will be a grueling enterprise that, like previous Israeli–Syrian peace talks, could reach a dead end. Negotiations between Syria and Israel stalled following the 1991 Madrid Conference; in 1996 after several

1. The phrase was coined by Professor Itamar Rabinovich, who conducted Israel's negotiations with Syria while he was posted as Israel's Ambassador in Washington. Quoted in Ehud Yaari, “Competitive Simultaneity,” *The Jerusalem Report*, January 3, 2000, p. 11.
2. Lee Hockstader, “Golan Residents Enlisting Allies,” *The Washington Post*, January 11, 2000, p. A1.
3. Editorial, “Its Assad's Move,” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 14, 2000, at <http://www.jpostcom/Editions/2000/01/14/Opinion/Opinion.1293.html>.
4. The text can be found on-line at http://www3.haaretz.co.il/eng/htmls/1_1.htm.

rounds of U.S.-sponsored negotiations in Wye River, Maryland; and most recently in 1998 when a diplomatic feeler extended by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu died a quiet death.⁵ Although the current round of talks is being conducted at a higher political level, the fact that Assad has kept his distance, dispatching instead his foreign minister, is a sign that he is not fully committed to a negotiated settlement.

Assad's recent rejection of Barak's call for a three-way summit with President Clinton makes many observers question how serious he is about the negotiations.⁶ He long has appeared to be more interested in milking the benefits of participating in the peace process than in making the hard concessions necessary to achieve a genuine peace.⁷

There are strong reasons to doubt his sincerity about achieving a genuine peace with Israel: Such a peace would deprive his brutal regime of a useful scapegoat, undermine the perceived need for Syria's swollen military budget, and remove a justification for his tyranny.⁸ By engaging in the peace process, Assad has shielded his regime from U.S. and Western pressure to end Syria's support of terrorism, strategic cooperation with Iran, and occupation of much of neighboring Lebanon.⁹

Assad also may hope that his flirtation with peace negotiations could pay dividends by luring the United States into acquiring a vested interest in the political future of his son Bashar, who is being groomed as heir apparent. The 69-year-old Syrian dictator, who has ruled since 1970, is ailing. According to a frequent Western visitor to Damascus, "He can function, but on three cylinders at best."¹⁰ Israel's intelligence agency, the Mossad, reportedly acquired a urine sample surreptitiously from Assad that has led Israeli doctors to the conclusion that he is "living on borrowed time," with diabetes, a heart condition, and a mild form of cancer.¹¹

Assad's declining health has set in motion a struggle for succession. Assad's ambitious younger brother, Rifaat, who was exiled from Syria following a failed coup attempt in 1984 when Assad was stricken by a heart attack, reportedly has contacted Syrian generals to test the waters for a possible return.¹² Rifaat has done this despite the fact that Syrian authorities ordered tanks to attack and demolish his seaside villa near the Mediterranean port of Latakia in October 1999, charging that it was being used to smuggle contraband.¹³

A power struggle between Rifaat and Bashar Assad could destabilize the regime. Prolonged

5. Netanyahu maintains that before his secret negotiations came to naught, he did obtain Syrian acceptance of Israel's retention of the Mount Hermon early warning facilities. Nina Gilbert, "Netanyahu: Syria Agreed to Hermon Early-Warning Station," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 15, 1999, at <http://www.jpost.com/News/Article-2.html>.
6. The state-controlled Syrian media dismissed Barak's invitation as "far-fetched." See "Assad Refuses Meeting With Barak," *The Washington Post*, January 16, 2000, p. A30.
7. See James Phillips, "Clinton Meets Assad: No Time to Appease Syria," Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 373, January 10, 1994.
8. Assad has improved his position vis-à-vis the West by stringing along the negotiations. See Daniel Pipes, "A Copernican View," *The Jerusalem Post*, January 25, 2000.
9. Daniel Pipes, "Syria Beyond the Peace Process," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Paper* No. 40, 1996, pp. 99–100.
10. Isabel Kershner, "The Assad Dynasty," *The Jerusalem Report*, January 17, 2000, p. 24.
11. Assad's urine sample reportedly was taken secretly from a specially constructed lavatory built exclusively for Assad's use when he visited Jordan for the February 1999 funeral of King Hussein. See Douglas Davis, "Report: Mossad Has Assad Urine Sample," *The Jerusalem Post*, January 10, 2000, at <http://www.jpost.com/Editions/2000/01/10/News/News.1155.html>.
12. Kershner, "The Assad Dynasty," p. 26.
13. "Syrian Succession Crisis Hampers Peace Process," Stratfor Special Report, October 23, 1999, at <http://www.stratfor.com/meaf/specialreports/special16.htm>.

political instability could even threaten the hold on power of Syria's ruling Alawite sect—a minority group to which all the Assads and roughly 12 percent of Syria's 17 million people belong.

CLINTON'S WOOING OF ASSAD

The Clinton Administration has pursued Syrian participation in the peace negotiations for some time. Former Secretary of State Warren Christopher's 20 or more visits to Syria were more than he made to any other country. In January 1994, President Clinton met with Assad in Geneva in a summit that accomplished little except to boost Assad's international standing and insulate Syria from charges that it was a rogue state like Iraq, Iran, or Libya.

President Clinton conducted months of secret diplomacy, including more than one dozen phone calls to Assad between August and December 1999.¹⁴ To gain Assad's assent to the renewal of official Syrian-Israeli negotiations after a hiatus of almost four years, the President reportedly promised Assad that Washington would support an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan and back up a peace treaty with U.S. foreign aid to both parties.¹⁵ Moreover, according to American sources, Clinton promised Assad that Washington would support his son Bashar to succeed him as Syria's leader and would help Bashar maintain the stability of his regime.¹⁶

U.S. aid also will figure prominently in any Israeli decision to sign a peace treaty. After returning from the Shepherdstown talks, Prime Minister Barak told members of his inner circle that what Syria is prepared to give Israel and what Israel is prepared to give Syria cannot be considered a sufficient foundation for a peace treaty without American pledges to fill in the gaps.¹⁷ According to a recent report, a textual analysis of the American working paper produced at the Shepherdstown talks "underscores the substantial U.S. contribution—political, financial, military and so forth—that Washington can be expected to offer to compensate Israel for what Syria itself will not provide bilaterally."¹⁸

The Israeli government has compiled a wish list for more than \$65 billion in U.S. economic and military aid.¹⁹ The size of the request led a respected Israeli journalist to conclude that "When the U.S. administration and Congress review the sums Israel expects to receive in aid as part of the peace agreements and withdrawals, they won't believe their eyes."²⁰ An unnamed Pentagon official familiar with the request has termed it "peace on our dime."²¹

Israel's \$65 billion wish list seems outlandish, particularly when the Barak government is telling Israelis that a Syrian-Israeli treaty would allow Israel to shorten the three-year enlistment periods of Israeli soldiers by six months.

14. John Lancaster and Lee Hockstader, "Secret Efforts by U.S. Put Israel, Syria Closer to Pact," *The Washington Post*, December 13, 1999, p. A1.

15. Leslie Susser, "The Golan or Peace," *The Jerusalem Report*, January 3, 2000, p. 8.

16. Leslie Susser, "Clinton Pledged to Maintain the Assad Dynasty," *The Jerusalem Report*, January 17, 2000, p. 6.

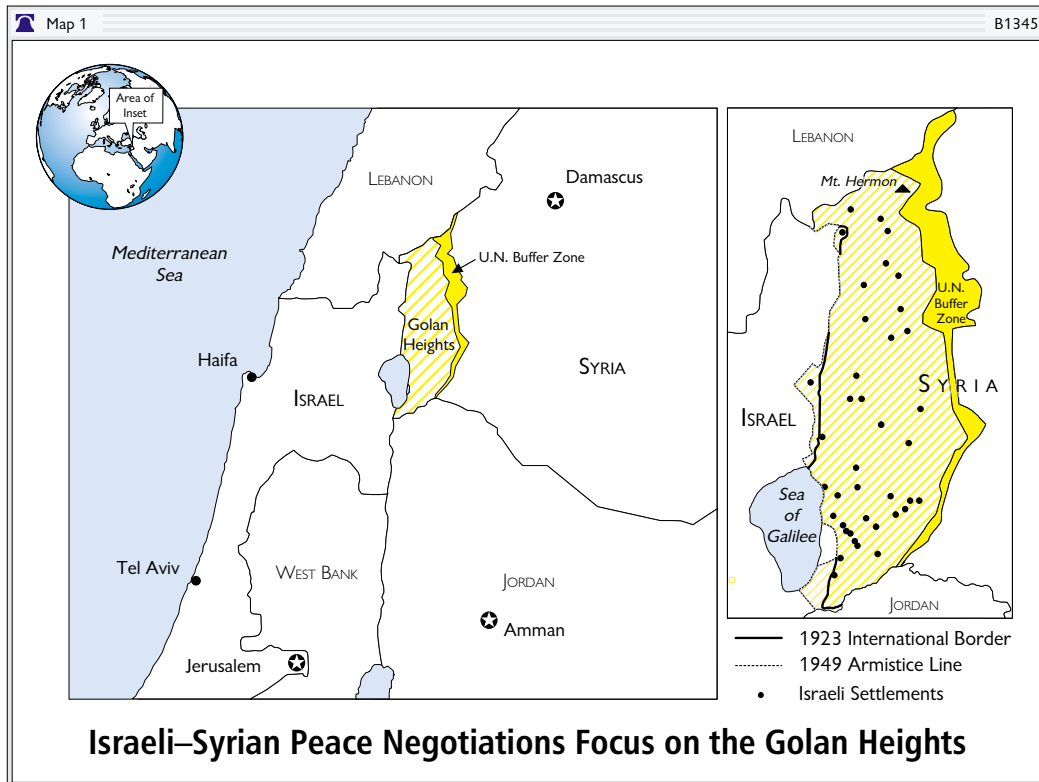
17. Dan Margalit, "A Cautious Optimism Reigns," *Ha'aretz*, English Internet Edition, January 13, 2000, at http://www3.haaretz.co.il/eng/htmls/kat45_4.htm.

18. Robert Satloff and Patrick Clawson, "The U.S. Draft Treaty for Israel-Syria Peace: A Textual Analysis," Washington Institute for Near East Policy *Peacewatch* No. 242, January 14, 2000, p. 5.

19. Israel has requested \$17.4 billion for security assistance related to a military withdrawal from the Golan. The remaining aid is requested for the evacuation of 17,000 Israeli settlers from the Golan, construction of water desalination plants, and other improvements in Israel's water system. See Ze'ev Schiff, "Full Asking Price for Peace Aid: \$65 billion," *Ha'aretz*, January 7, 2000, at http://www3.haaretz.co.il/eng/htmls/kat3_2.htm.

20. Ze'ev Schiff, "Not Less than \$65 Billion," *Ha'aretz*, January 7, 2000, at http://www3.haaretz.co.il/eng/htmls/kat7_3.htm.

21. John Lancaster, "Peace Talks Get Down to Committee Work," *The Washington Post*, January 5, 2000, p. A14.



zone gives it strategic depth against a formidable Syrian armored force that is capable of rapidly mobilizing and launching a surprise attack from prepared positions close to the border.

Strategic depth is important because it buys time for Israel to mobilize its own armed forces, which are much smaller than Syria's and much more reliant on the mobilization of reserve forces.

Although the proliferation of ground-to-ground missiles has lessened the importance of strategic depth, wars ultimately are won on the ground, as the Gulf War proved. Although Syria is not strong enough to defeat Israel in a war by itself, Israeli leaders must consider the potential Syrian threat in conjunction with other Arab threats. For example, Iraq has dispatched forces to Syria or Jordan to help them fight Israel in three Arab-Israeli wars.

If it surrenders the Golan, Israel will be taking asymmetrical risks: It will be making a concrete concession that undermines its security in exchange for an easily reversible promise of peace that could easily be exploded by Assad, his successor, or a new Syrian regime. Washington therefore must try to shape a settlement that mitigates the security risks as much as possible. For example:

WASHINGTON'S AGENDA FOR A STABLE PEACE

Given the likelihood that the Clinton Administration is taking the lead in pushing a Syrian-Israeli peace settlement that cannot be consummated without generous U.S. aid, the United States will bear a heavy responsibility for the resulting peace. While promoting a secure and stable peace settlement between Israel and Syria, the United States must not lose sight of its own national interests in the Middle East or its security commitments elsewhere around the world.

In shaping the Syrian-Israeli negotiations during the coming months, the Clinton Administration should adopt the following specific do's and don'ts.

What Washington Should Do

- 1. **Work for a peace settlement that minimizes Israel's long-term security risks.**

For Israel, the Golan Heights are an irreplaceable strategic asset. The 450-square-mile buffer

- **Borders.** Syrian demands for restoration of its sovereignty over the Golan theoretically could be reconciled with Israeli security demands by allowing Israel to lease a strip of the western Golan from the Syrians for several decades. Retaining such Israeli control over the western cliffs overlooking Israel's Hulah valley would

ease concerns over Syrian artillery or sniper attacks, such as those that frequently occurred before the 1967 war, and give Syria the opportunity to demonstrate its good faith. If Syria rejects this, then the border should revert to the international border negotiated between the British and French colonial powers in 1923. This border, which runs slightly east of the 1967 line of control, would deprive the Syrians of territory that they conquered by force between 1948 and 1967.

- **Mount Hermon.** Israel's early warning facilities, located on a 7,300-foot-high ridge of Mount Hermon roughly 26 miles southwest of Damascus, offer unimpeded surveillance of Syrian air space and military bases for which there is no topographical substitute inside Israel. Israel should be allowed to retain its personnel on Mount Hermon.
- **Demilitarized Zones.** Territory that Israel returns to Syria should be totally demilitarized; Syria should be allowed to deploy small numbers of police on that territory, but no military personnel. Syrian military forces also should be thinned out in western Syria, with tight restrictions placed on the deployment of Syrian armored forces and heavy artillery.

2. **Help compensate Israel for the loss of the Golan Heights.**

The United States can help compensate Israel for the loss of the Golan, but it cannot fully replace it.

- **Aid.** Washington should provide aid for the relocation of Israeli military forces and bases from the Golan. However, it should not provide compensation for the 17,000 Israeli settlers on the Golan who moved there over American opposition.
- **Intelligence.** To upgrade Israel's early warning capabilities, Washington should provide Israel with a ground station that is capable of down-

Table 1			B1345
Military Strength: Israel and Syria			
	Israel	Syria	
1998 GDP*	\$97 billion	\$37 billion	
Defense Budget *	\$6.7 billion	\$2.9 billion	
Active Armed Forces	173,000	316,000	
Reserves	425,000	396,000	
Main Battle Tanks	3,800	4,650	
Towed Artillery	420	1,480	
Self-propelled Artillery	1,010	450	
Combat Aircraft	459	589	
Armed Helicopters	133	72	

Note: *U.S. dollars. All data for 1999, except GDP.
Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance: 1999-2000*, 1999.

loading real-time intelligence from U.S. intelligence satellites that are monitoring Syria. This would guarantee Israel a continuing source of military intelligence concerning Syrian military deployments if Israel's monitoring facilities on Mount Hermon were knocked out in a war. Unmanned aerial vehicles, such as the Global Hawk currently being developed by the United States, also could help Israel maintain surveillance over the Golan border region.²²

- **Arms.** To help Israel maintain its qualitative military superiority, the United States can provide advanced arms capable of defeating a Syrian armored thrust, such as Apache helicopters, J-STARS airborne radar aircraft, and MLRS (Multiple Launch Rocket System) surface-to-surface missiles. Washington should also provide Tomahawk cruise missiles to give Israel standoff weapons that can strengthen deterrence against a Syrian attack.

22. See Dov Zakheim, "Hi-tech Eyes and Ears," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 30, 1999, at <http://www/jpost.com/Opinion/Article-1.html>.

3. **Require Syria to crack down systematically on terrorists.**

Syria long has used terrorism as an adjunct of its foreign policy. It gives sanctuary and political, military, and financial support to a wide variety of Palestinian, Lebanese, Turkish, Kurdish, and other terrorist groups.

Despite its flirtation with the peace process, Syria continues to support Palestinian groups opposed to the 1993 Oslo Accords, including Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command. In Lebanon, Syria cooperates with the radical Islamic Hezbollah militia, which was responsible for the 1983 bombings of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and the Marine peacekeeping compound near the Beirut airport, as well as the kidnapping of 15 American hostages in Lebanon between 1984 and 1991. Damascus also has supported the Kurdish Workers Party, which has waged a bloody terrorist campaign against Turkey since 1984 in a vain effort to carve out a separate Kurdish state in eastern Turkey.

Turkey scored a major victory against terrorism when it threatened military action to force Syria to expel Abdullah Oculan, the leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), and 300 of his followers in October 1998. Assad bowed to Turkey's ultimatum to halt Syrian support for the PKK when confronted with Turkey's resolve and growing military cooperation with Israel, as well as the perception that the PKK had become a liability.²³

The Clinton Administration must drive home to Assad that supporting any terrorist group is a liability. In the past, the Administration has taken a lax attitude toward Syrian support of terrorism. For example, President Clinton lauded the establishment of a Syrian–American working group as a major achievement of his 1994 meeting with

Assad, but the working group “met once and was never heard of again.”²⁴

The Administration reportedly has deferred discussion of Syrian support for terrorism while it focuses on advancing the peace negotiations.²⁵ But Assad will retain his terrorist surrogates unless he is pressured firmly to abandon them. The Clinton Administration should demand that Syria disband, disarm, and expel all terrorist groups based in Syria or Syrian-controlled Lebanese territory and cooperate in arresting and extraditing the leaders of all terrorist groups—not just the Palestinian groups.

4. **Require Syria to end its strategic cooperation with Iran and halt the flow of Iranian supplies to the radical Shiite Hezbollah militia in Lebanon.**

Syria is one of the few Arab states that cooperates closely with Iran. Damascus supported Iran in its 1980–1988 war against Iraq and allows Iran to deploy several hundred Revolutionary Guards in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon. These Iranian militants train Hezbollah and other terrorists and supply them with arms transported through Syria. The Clinton Administration should insist that Syria block this supply line and expel the Iranian Revolutionary Guards from Lebanon.

5. **Require Syria to end its support for drug smuggling and counterfeiting operations in Lebanon.**

Syria has become an important transit country for illegal drugs, particularly hashish and heroin, some of which is being refined in Syria. Much of the drug trafficking originates in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley, and “Syrian officials are widely reported to have profited from facilitating the sale and transit of Lebanese-produced hashish and heroin destined for Europe and the United

23. Ely Karmon, “A Solution to Syrian Terrorism,” *Middle East Quarterly*, June 1999, p. 26.

24. David Schenker, “Removing Syria from the List of State Sponsors of Terrorism: Between Peace and Counterterrorism,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy *Peacewatch* No. 239, January 5, 2000, p. 1.

25. Robert Satloff, “Make Syria Pay a Price for Peace,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2000, p. A22.

States.”²⁶ Syria also is suspected of cooperating with Iran in distributing high-quality counterfeit U.S. currency through terrorist groups and smuggling rings in Lebanon.²⁷

6. Require Syria to assist in containing Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

The Clinton Administration should press Syria to cooperate in containing the regime of Saddam Hussein in neighboring Iraq. There is no love lost between Assad and Hussein, long-time rivals for leadership of the Arab world who lead competing wings of the Arab Socialist Baath (Renaissance) party.

At a minimum, the United States should insist that Syria close its border to Iraq to curtail illegal trade that is circumventing the United Nations-sponsored economic sanctions against Iraq. If Damascus hopes to pry foreign aid out of Washington, it should be required to give sanctuary and support to the Iraqi National Congress, the leading opposition group that is fighting Saddam’s brutal regime, and allow the United States to base aircraft on Syrian territory to enforce the no-fly zones in Iraq.

7. Work to build a stable, independent Lebanon.

Roughly 35,000 Syrian troops occupy much of northeastern Lebanon. Syria initially intervened in Lebanon in 1975, ostensibly as a peacekeeping operation under the auspices of the Arab League. But at the 1989 conference on Lebanon sponsored by the Arab League in Taif, Saudi Arabia, Damascus agreed to a phased withdrawal of Syrian troops to the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, and to negotiate subsequently with the Lebanese government on the future status of its forces. Instead, Syria has extended its control over Lebanon, occupying almost 90 percent of the country north of

Israel’s security zone in October 1990 and establishing a stranglehold on Lebanese politics.

The Clinton Administration should press Syria to abide by the Taif agreement and allow the Lebanese government to expand its control over Lebanese territory. Washington should stress that if Damascus cannot fulfill the commitments it made at Taif to other Arab states, it should not expect to be considered a reliable negotiating partner that is likely to fulfill commitments it makes to Israel or the United States.

8. Consult with Congress before making any commitments.

President Clinton should consult congressional leaders in a timely manner before making any commitments for diplomatic, military, and foreign aid that his successor and Congress would be forced to deliver in the future. The \$1.9 billion aid package for Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians that President Clinton pledged to deliver at the October 1998 Wye River peace summit was delayed and almost lost because the President presented Congress with a fait accompli. The Clinton Administration should not risk stumbling into a similar embarrassment in the future.

What Washington Should Not Do

1. Do not commit U.S. peacekeeping troops to the Golan Heights.²⁸

The Golan Heights present a more formidable peacekeeping challenge than the existing U.S. peacekeeping mission on the Sinai Peninsula, the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), which monitors compliance with the security arrangements of the 1979 Egypt–Israel peace treaty. The MFO is often cited as a model for a U.S. peacekeeping presence on the Golan, but U.S. peace-

26. Alfred Prados, “Syria: U.S. Relations and Bilateral Issues,” Congressional Research Service *Issue Brief* No. 92075, updated February 25, 1999, p. 8.

27. See House Republican Research Committee, Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, “Iran, Syria, and the Trail of Counterfeit Dollars,” July 1, 1992; see also House Republican Research Committee, Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare, “Update: Iran, Syria, and the Trail of Counterfeit Money,” July 13, 1994, pp. 6–12.

28. See Thomas Moore and James Phillips, “Beware of Deploying U.S. Peacekeepers on the Golan Heights,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1066, February 1, 1996.

keepers in the Golan Heights would operate in a markedly different geographic, military, and political environment. Rather than being deployed in a vast desert far from the main bodies of the opposing military forces, they would be stationed in a constricted area, sandwiched between large armored forces in positions that would quickly become important military objectives if fighting were to break out.

An MFO-like monitoring force would be small and lightly armed; but a small, light force would have difficulty protecting itself from terrorist attacks that may emanate from Lebanon, let alone a Syrian military offensive. Unlike the remote, sparsely populated Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights would be a more hospitable operating theater for terrorists from Lebanon or living among civilians in the Golan Heights.

Therefore, a U.S. peacekeeping force in the Golan would have to be large enough to deter attacks from any source and defend itself. In other words, it would have to be a large combat formation, configured for possible combat, with appropriate rules of engagement. But a large force, such as an armored or mechanized infantry brigade, would be both costly and a drain on the U.S. military presence in more important strategic regions, such as the Persian Gulf or Korean peninsula.

U.S. forces on the Golan would be inadequate to defend Israel if it is attacked. They likely would constitute only a marginal military deterrent to Syria and would be unable to provide adequate early warning to Israel.²⁹ In essence, they would serve as a trip wire in the event of another war.

The real rationale for the U.S. presence is not military, but political—to reassure a nervous Israeli public about security concerns that the United States would be in no position to remedy if conflict were to erupt. This is dangerous because it

could engender a false sense of security that could lead the Israelis to take more risks in peace negotiations with Syria than they otherwise would.

The Effect on Combat Readiness. A peacekeeping presence in the Golan would be a further drain on U.S. military forces, which already are stretched thin around the world. The United States cannot afford to commit an ever-larger proportion of its declining active-duty forces to worldwide peacekeeping operations. Sending U.S. troops to Kosovo and Bosnia already has depleted America's strategic reserve and undermined readiness. It should be remembered that the peacekeeping commitments to Kosovo and Bosnia were made in addition to existing U.S. security commitments in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

For a Golan peacekeeping mission to be credible would require the commitment of a large force consisting of at least a heavy brigade—roughly 5,000 troops. To maintain a long-term deployment of this force, three brigades would have to be dedicated to the mission: one on deployment, one recovering and retraining after returning from the mission, and one training and preparing to deploy on the mission. This is roughly 10 percent of the U.S. Army's active-duty combat strength, a prohibitively high burden for an open-ended peacekeeping mission. If the United States were suddenly faced with conflict in other regions of the world, such as the Persian Gulf or the Korean peninsula, the forces on the Golan could well be needed to protect vital U.S. national interests.

An open-ended peacekeeping mission on the Golan also would reduce the military effectiveness of troops available for other missions. Troops returning from the Golan would need many months of retraining to regain the warfighting skills that inevitably would have atrophied during the peacekeeping deployment.

29. For a more detailed analysis of the likely military shortcomings of a U.S. peacekeeping force, see Douglas Feith, General John Foss, Frank Gaffney, and Admiral Carl Trost, "Mission Impossible: The Case Against Deploying U.S. Forces on the Golan Heights," Center for Security Policy, Washington, D.C., October 12, 1994. See also Dore Gold, "US Forces on the Golan Heights and Israeli-Syrian Security Arrangements," Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies *Memorandum* No. 44, August 1994.

The Exposure to Terrorism. Golan peacekeepers would be vulnerable to significant terrorist threats. They would be stationed close to southern and eastern Lebanon, the staging areas for some of the world's most dangerous terrorists, including Hezbollah, the militant pro-Iranian terrorist group responsible for the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. Hezbollah and other terrorist groups operating inside Lebanon have a history of attacking Americans. They would have even more reason to use terrorism to disrupt a U.S.-brokered peace agreement that they violently oppose.

Syria itself is one of the chief exporters of international terrorism.³⁰ The Assad regime repeatedly has used terrorism as an adjunct of foreign policy in inter-Arab politics, in Lebanon, and against Israel. Assad also supported Hezbollah's terrorist campaign against U.S. peacekeeping forces in Lebanon in 1983–1984. Given Syria's success in helping Hezbollah to drive U.S. peacekeepers out of Lebanon in 1984, Assad could well try a similar strategy in the Golan to seek the removal of the peacekeepers. Even if Assad should cooperate in restraining terrorism, however, Iran, Iraq, and Libya could support Lebanon-based terrorist proxies against U.S. forces in the Golan.

Since U.S. troops would be a lightning rod for terrorism, particularly because of America's brokering of the Syrian–Israeli peace accord, they should not be placed in harm's way to man a Golan peacekeeping operation. If peacekeepers are needed to monitor a Syrian–Israeli peace treaty, they should be drawn from other countries. The United Nations Disengagement Observer Force has deployed peacekeepers from Austria, Canada, Finland, and Poland on the Golan Heights for over two decades to monitor compliance with the 1974 Israeli–Syrian Disengagement Agreement.

2. Do not push Israel into any settlement that it believes would undermine its security.

President Clinton must remember that Israel is a close ally: one that has fought three wars with Syria, itself an ally of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. A stable Middle East peace cannot be imposed by an external power and must be based on a strong security foundation. The United States should allow the two sides to work out their differences, not intervene on Syria's behalf to force concessions from Israel that could undermine its security.

3. Do not rush the negotiations needlessly.

At Shepherdstown, President Clinton set a two-month deadline for negotiating a Syrian–Israeli peace accord. Assad's declining health and the approaching end of President Clinton's term in office put additional pressure on the parties to reach a rapid settlement.

But a good agreement is more important than a quick one. The Syrian–Israeli rivalry is likely to remain stable as long as Israel enjoys military superiority. Further, signing a deal with Assad is no guarantee that his successor will observe its terms. Moreover, the longer Israel waits, the better its chances of extracting a more advantageous deal from Syria may be. Assad's successor will be weaker and probably more amenable to compromise. Even if Assad survives his ailments for an extended period, the Syrian economy is ailing, and this will generate growing pressure on Damascus to improve relations with the West to gain aid, trade, foreign investment, loans, and technology.

Time is growing short for President Clinton to secure his "legacy" and for Assad to engineer a smooth transition of power to his chosen successor, Bashar. In the words of one Israeli expert on the Syrian economy, however, "a rush by Israel to reach agreement with Assad makes about as much sense as the United States rushing in 1989 to reach agreements with the Soviet Union."³¹ Washington should not undermine Israeli efforts to negotiate a

30. See James Phillips, "The Changing Face of Middle Eastern Terrorism," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1005, October 6, 1994.

31. Steven Plaut, "The Collapsing Syrian Economy," *Middle East Quarterly*, September 1999, p. 14.

stable peace by imposing arbitrary negotiating deadlines.

4. Do not give foreign aid to Syria merely as a reward for peace.

Under no circumstances should the U.S. promise foreign aid to Syria as a sweetener for a peace agreement. The prospective return of the Golan Heights and peace itself are Syria's peace dividends. The Assad regime should not expect to be showered with U.S. aid as Anwar Sadat's Egypt was after the 1979 Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty.

First of all, Sadat did not support terrorism against Americans. Second, he took great personal and political risks to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough and push for a genuine reconciliation between Egypt and Israel, unlike Assad who insists implacably on Syria's maximum demands as if Syria had won, rather than lost, three wars with Israel. Finally, Sadat led Egypt out of the Soviet orbit and into a strategic alliance with the United States, while Assad led Syria into a close alliance with the Soviet Union, signing a 1980 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Moscow and inviting 13,000 Soviet and East European advisers into Syria.³²

Syria today does not have the same geopolitical importance that Egypt enjoyed in 1979. It does not have as large a population, as impressive a military force, or the same claim to Arab leadership that Egypt enjoyed. Moreover, now that the Cold War has ended and there is no Soviet Union seeking to outbid the West for the allegiance of regional powers, the perceived value of Syrian cooperation on foreign policy and security issues also has declined. In fact, the collapse of its superpower patron and the poor prospects for its stagnant socialist economy have given Damascus increasing incentives to cooperate with the West and escape its self-imposed isolation.

These factors, combined with the political vulnerability of the Assad regime over the impending succession struggle, mean that Assad needs the United States more than the United States needs Assad.

Instead of rewarding Syria with foreign aid for a peace settlement that advances Syrian interests, Washington should reward Syria with foreign aid only if Damascus actively supports U.S. foreign policy goals outside the Arab–Israeli peace process. No aid should be promised unless Syria not only signs a peace treaty with Israel, but also takes concrete actions to cooperate with the United States in fighting terrorism, containing Iraq, isolating Iran, halting drug smuggling, and promoting a stable and independent Lebanon.

5. Do not give U.S. arms to Syria.

It does not make sense to give Damascus U.S. arms that could be used against Israel, Jordan, Turkey, or the Syrian people if they should rebel against the Assad dictatorship, as they did in 1982.³³ Moreover, giving arms to Syria would require giving more arms to Israel to counterbalance the threat of those arms that are in Syrian hands.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian–Israeli peace negotiations offer the United States a risky opportunity to promote a comprehensive regional peace and advance its own national interests outside the Arab–Israeli peace process, but it is not clear that the Assad regime is serious about negotiating a genuine peace with Israel. There is no sense of reconciliation, only a grudging and dogged insistence on recovering the Golan Heights. The shrewd Assad appears determined to exploit the Clinton Administration's eagerness for peace to obtain U.S. cooperation in extracting major concessions from Israel, U.S. economic aid to bolster the faltering

32. Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, *Syria: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), p. 227.

33. An uprising against the Assad regime was brutally crushed in the city of Hama in February 1982, with the loss of 10,000 to 20,000 lives.

Syrian economy, and American support for his regime.

The challenge for the United States is to promote a peace settlement that enhances the long-term security of its ally Israel and advances U.S. national interests by helping to contain Iran and Iraq, fight international terrorism, promote a stable and independent Lebanon, and reduce international drug smuggling. To these ends, Washington should explore ways to bridge the gaps between Israel and Syria.

But Washington should shape a settlement that does not commit the United States to a costly, risky, and open-ended peacekeeping mission that masks the security risks of an Israeli surrender of the Golan Heights without significantly reducing these risks. Moreover, the United States cannot afford to undertake such a burdensome peacekeeping commitment that will undermine military readiness and divert the U.S. armed forces from more pressing security commitments in the Per-

sian Gulf, Europe, and the Korean peninsula. If peacekeeping troops are needed to cement a Syrian–Israeli settlement, they should be drawn from other countries that will be less of a lightning rod for terrorism.

The United States should provide Israel with enhanced military aid to help compensate for its loss of strategic depth if it returns the Golan Heights to Syria. But Washington should not provide military aid to Syria; it should provide only foreign aid that is linked clearly to Syria's active support for U.S. foreign policy goals in the Middle East. Syria's peace dividend would be the return of most of the Golan, peace with Israel, better economic relations with the West, and economic aid from Europe, Japan, and oil-rich Persian Gulf states.

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