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“25 YEARS OF ASSAD’S SYRIA: READY FOR PEACE?”

MOSHE MA’OZ AND DANIEL PIPES

On Monday, October 23, 1995, Professor Moshe Ma’oz, director of the Harry S. Truman Institution for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University, and Dr. Daniel Pipes, editor of the Middle East Quarterly, addressed a session of The Washington Institute’s Policy Forum on the evolution of Hafez al-Assad’s peace process strategy over the last twenty-five years. The following is a rapporteur’s summary of their remarks.

MOSHE MA’OZ

To understand the dynamics of Assad’s peace strategy today it is important to see how it fits in a two-decade effort to manage the conflict with Israel. As early as 1974, Assad developed a dual-track strategy that mixed military power with a willingness for a political settlement with Israel on his own terms. In the early years—1974-1977—Assad was willing to discuss a non-belligerency accord, to be negotiated via the United States. After Camp David, Assad shifted gears and began to place more emphasis on the military track, seeking to create a level of strategic parity to make up for the absence of Egypt from the potential Arab coalition. This effort continued through the Lebanon War when Israeli’s actions confirmed to Assad the need to build his own military power. Finally in 1988, Assad returned to a focus on diplomacy when the collapse of the Soviet Union and the near-bankruptcy of the Syrian economy brought an end to Syria’s quest for strategic parity. Compensating for the absence of a patron and the lack of a convincing military option has governed Syrian policy ever since and led to Assad’s participation in the Madrid peace process.

While Israel and Syria seemed to agree to mark time in the peace process during the Shamir Government, the advent of the Labor-led government in 1992 opened the possibility for real movement. In response to Labor’s clearer statements on the potential for a peace based on territorial withdrawal, Assad has outlined a peace scheme that includes the following: full and speedy Israeli withdrawal to the borders of June 4, 1967, recognition of Syria’s dominant role in Lebanon, and balanced, non-intrusive security arrangements in return for a chilly peace of formal diplomatic and economic relations whose implementation will await the completion of Israeli withdrawal. For Assad, this is “full peace for full withdrawal.”

Observers who criticize Assad for doing too little to convince Israelis of his sincerity for peace—as Sadat did by visiting Jerusalem in 1977—do not recognize two factors: 1) that Assad is fundamentally different from Sadat and would certainly never consider mimicking Sadat’s preference for political theatrics and 2) in his own context, Assad has done a great deal in the realm of public diplomacy but has not been recognized for it. These latter steps include: telling President Clinton—in Arabic, on two separate occasions—that Syria agrees to “normal, peaceful relations” with Israel and, on another occasion, that Syria would give Israel a peace like Egypt’s and Jordan’s peace with Israel; permitting Syrian Jews to emigrate; meeting with an Israeli-Arab delegation in Damascus; and having placards hung throughout Damascus extolling the virtues of peace. At the same time, Assad maintains his dual-track policy by exercising the “stick” of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. By using the proxy tool of Hezbollah, Assad reminds the Israelis that he still has power to hurt them where they are most vulnerable—a democracy’s sensitivity to loss of life.

The sum of this assessment is that Assad is ready for peace, though peace on his terms. He especially wants peace with the United States, but realizes that the road to Washington travels through Jerusalem.

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For Assad, politics is a matter of priorities. If the price of making a formal peace with Israel would be offset by the return of the Golan, international recognition of his dominance in Lebanon, removal from the U.S. list of terror-supporting states, integration into the world financial and economic system, and the receipt of significant foreign investment, it would be a reasonable price to pay.

DANIEL PIPES

It is important to place Assad in context before discussing his strategies toward the peace process with Israel. Domestically, Assad is extremely vulnerable. With his eldest son dead, and his middle son neither prepared nor trained to take over the country, the question of succession weighs heavily on Assad's mind. His first priority is to retain power, for himself, his family, and his people—the Alawis. All other issues, including peace with Israel, are secondary.

Today Assad is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, after twenty-five years in power his natural inclination is to maintain the same brutal, totalitarian policies that have sustained the regime for so long. However, the Soviet Union's demise and Israel's military dominance require him to establish good relations with the West as a form of protective umbrella; a new relationship with the West will ensure that no Israeli government would take advantage of his weakness and that his ethnically-torn regime would not be doomed to a Yugoslav, Romanian, or even a Rwandan fate. The problem is that turning to the West requires making peace with Israel as well as a certain amount of opening at home. Assad would prefer to follow the Chinese model, of welcoming Western capital but not Western ideas, but this is proving a difficult balancing act.

Given this dilemma, Assad's formula is to participate in the peace process but not to achieve peace itself. Participation wins him the understanding and sympathy of the West without actually having to make substantive, historical concessions to Israel. This approach allows him to be flexible on side issues (permitting direct negotiations with Israel, for example) but adamant on core issues (such as the extent of withdrawal). This approach worked quite well when the Likud Government was in power because Shamir could be counted on not to press the issue of a peacemaking too far; in Assad's view, however, the Labor-led government has proven especially problematic because Rabin has made considerable concessions that call Assad's bluff. On the key negotiating issues, the situation is as follows:

- *The extent of the withdrawal.* Assad initially demanded withdrawal to pre-1967 lines. Israeli leaders have publicly agreed to a withdrawal to the international border—which has small but significant differences from the 1967 lines—and Rabin himself has repeatedly intimated that Israel could not keep “a single inch” of the Golan if it wanted peace. In effect, the Israelis have agreed to a “full withdrawal.”
- *The time-table for withdrawal.* Israel has reduced the withdrawal period from an eight-year to a four-year time-table, while Assad has moved from an initial six-month to an eighteen-month period. It should not be too difficult to narrow the gaps in this disagreement since both sides have made compromises.
- *Security arrangements.* Syria originally wanted strict equality in the geographic depth of demilitarized and forced limitation zones, while Israel presented a nine-to-one ratio in Israel's favor. Assad has apparently now conceded to a ten-to-six ratio, accepting the principle of disproportionality.
- *Normalization of relations.* Israel originally wished to normalize relations after implementation of the first stage of withdrawal. Syria, however, was only willing to normalize after a full withdrawal had taken place. Syria has now apparently agreed to low-level diplomatic relations after the first stage, thus conceding the principle.

Assad's problem is that progress is being made despite his “best” intentions; because Israel has largely called Syria's bluff on key issues, virtually all the components of a deal have been worked out in principle even though Assad does not truly want to make peace with Israel. As a result, Assad has decided to slow down the process, which now suffers from long droughts between rounds of talks and frequent impasses. The explanation for the current impasse is that Assad is likely to hold out until after the U.S. and Israeli elections, to see if the urgency for peacemaking is as strong then as it is now.

If the United States believes that peace is attainable it has the potential for changing Assad's calculus by raising the cost of stalling. Already there are considerable “carrots” that Assad expects to receive in exchange for a peace agreement; now is the time to inject a series of “sticks” into the relationship to underscore the price of failing to take advantage of this peacemaking opportunity.

This special Policy Forum report was prepared by Lauren Rossman