

# It's Syria That Counts in the Middle East

By DANIEL PIPES

Conventional wisdom has it that the Palestine Liberation Organization is crucial to an Arab-Israeli peace settlement. Several former U.S. ambassadors to Middle Eastern countries have recently made this point: Robert Neumann, formerly the U.S. envoy to Saudi Arabia, argues that "contact with the PLO is the key in the door [to a settlement]." Hermann Eilts (United Arab Emirates) writes that "it's time to talk to the PLO." Michael Sterner (Egypt) says the PLO must be involved in negotiations as one of "the real parties to the conflict." But these writers and everyone who believes in the importance of the PLO are missing a major development: The PLO no longer figures in an Arab-Israeli settlement. The Arab actor that really counts is Syria.

PLO impotence can be demonstrated by thinking through the consequences of a change in Israeli attitudes toward the PLO. Suppose Jerusalem held negotiations with Yasser Arafat's wing of the PLO and granted it exclusive control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip in return for a peace treaty. What would change?

## Accusations Against Arafat

Egypt would be pleased, to be sure, for a PLO-Israeli accord legitimizes its own peace treaty with Israel in Arab eyes. Many Lebanese would also react favorably. But the Jordanian government, bitterly disappointed at losing the contest for the West Bank, would compete for influence in the PLO territories, possibly through subversion. The anti-Arafat wing of the PLO, Libya, Algeria and South Yemen would unreservedly condemn Mr. Arafat for agreeing to anything less than the complete destruction of Israel—and Iraq would join them when its war with Iran ends. Saudi Arabia would once again straddle the fence.

Most important, the Syrian government would unequivocally reject a PLO-Israeli settlement. Damascus already calls Mr. Arafat a "deviationist" and "a U.S. tool" for even considering negotiations with Israel. It accuses him of descending into "a swamp of treason [and] capitulation" and adopting "conspiratorial methods against the Palestine question." President Hafez Assad openly promises "unlimited support for the national forces that oppose the plotting of King Hussein and Yasser Arafat." Syria's record—it led the opposition to Egypt's peace treaty with Israel in 1979,

prevented Jordanian acceptance of the 1982 Reagan peace plan, split the PLO when Mr. Arafat showed interest in negotiations in early 1983, and forced the Lebanese government to abrogate its May 1983 agreement with Israel—shows this threat to be very serious.

Even if a PLO-Israeli accord survived Syrian opposition, the Arab-Israeli conflict would continue unchanged. The Syrian military threat to Israel would remain as strong as ever. With its 400,000 regular troops, 650 combat aircraft, and nearly 4,000 tanks, Syria has larger military forces than Israel. The quality of its soldiers is steadily improving, and close ties to the Soviet Union ensure adequate resupply of weapons in case of war.

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Nor does joint PLO-Jordanian diplomacy fare much better. Jordan's government is fragile, its armed forces small, and its population divided. Were King Hussein to sign an agreement with Israel, Syria and its allies would incite Palestinians in Jordan to revolt, deploy terrorism against Jordanian officials, harass Jordan's northern border, and plot coups d'état.

But what if Syria signed a peace treaty with Israel? The consequences would be very different. Egypt's isolation ends, Lebanese Christians renew the May 1983 agreement with Israel, and Saudi Arabia gratefully extricates itself from the whole issue. Jordan quickly offers a peace treaty to Israel in return for some or all of the West Bank; assuming Israel accepts, it gains peaceful borders with its four neighbors. The Arab-Israeli conflict is over.

Having settled the conflict, the neighbors would reject PLO claims for territory. Bereft of support from the key Arab states, the PLO would disappear and Palestinians would quietly settle wherever they were. Libya, Algeria, South Yemen and other distant states might continue to uphold PLO aspirations to destroy Israel, but this would hardly matter once Egypt, Jordan and Syria settled.

The Arab-Israeli conflict boils down to a Syrian-Israeli conflict. Syria, not the PLO,

makes the major decisions of war and peace. The conflict will go on until Syria follows Israel's other three neighbors and resigns itself to Israel's existence; once this happens, the struggle will come to a rapid end. The Syrian leadership fully realizes its obstructionist role and boasts that "all [Middle East] states would rest in peace" if it accepted the Camp David agreements.

Attempting to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict with the PLO is like trying to end the nuclear-arms race through an agreement with Yugoslavia. To be sure, Belgrade is friendlier than Moscow and more susceptible to American influence. But it does not possess nuclear weapons and cannot end the arms race. Likewise, the PLO

cannot decide the Arab position on war and peace. It is not a key, but a diversion, a red herring. A PLO-Israeli agreement that excludes Syria achieves almost nothing; a Syrian-Israeli settlement that excludes the PLO achieves everything.

Two features of Syrian foreign policy limit what the U.S. can do to help bring about such a settlement.

First, President Assad has staked out a position as the foremost adversary of the U.S. in the Middle East. Close relations with Libya and Iran place Syria at the heart of an alliance responsible for virtually all of the terrorism against Americans in the Middle East, from the Marine barracks bombing to the TWA hijacking. Syrian leaders make no secret of their antagonism. Mr. Assad is quoted as saying that "the United States is the primary enemy" facing Syria. His prime minister has threatened, "If I were able to strike at Washington I would do so." Anti-bomb barricades around the White House indicate the extent of U.S. government concern.

Conversely, Mr. Assad has made Syria the key Soviet ally in the Middle East. He signed a treaty of friendship with Moscow and regularly votes at the United Nations in favor of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Damascus is currently helping a coalition of pro-Soviet forces gain power in Lebanon. Syria's near-total identification with Soviet interests drastically limits how



## Soviet and Syrian Mideast Policies

As a frequent Mideast visitor, I hear all kinds of arguments that pessimism is the only rational outcome when considering the possibility of peace. But in his Aug. 13 version of this view on the editorial page, Mr. Daniel Pipes discovered more gloom and doom than there really is when he concluded that a coup in Syria is a necessary first step. Syria is clearly a crucial factor in the equation, but in recounting the fact of Soviet arming of Damascus Mr. Pipes has gone on to claim that Soviet and Syrian interests are congruent and that Syria under Assad will never agree to anything except the status quo.

In my view, the Russians' only objective in the area is meddling leading to sustained chaos, or the continuation of what is and has been happening in the region. I doubt that Mr. Assad expects the Soviets to give him his Golan Heights or any of Syria's other territorial claims and I seriously doubt he would use Russian arms on his own to achieve any policy objective other than to insure a voice in whatever talks may occur. When Mr. Assad has a platform from which to make his case, when his nation is considered by scholars like Mr. Pipes as something other than a womb for senseless terrorism, and when he sees that Syria's voice in pursuit of its legitimate objectives will be heard equally with some chance for success, then the Russians will find themselves on the wrong end of a Syrian exorcism. The status quo is not in Syria's interests and Mr. Assad may well have reasons to be dismayed if it lasts until after he passes away of old age—let alone if he is sent into the hereafter as a result of Mr. Pipes's coup d'état.

President Reagan's 1982 initiative, King Hussein's latest move and Saudi Arabian participation in an international approach that includes Syria offer the best hopes for progress toward peace. This can work because it will go forward on a solid foundation of an absolute American goal—the survival of Israel and peace in the region. A settlement will materialize when all the parties who will have to live with one another on common national borders sit down at the same table, including Syria and all of the Palestinian factions. The only necessary and legitimate American role in such a process is as a vigorous promoter of getting on with it, and as a catalyst once it begins. This is the message our ambassadors to the Mideast have been bringing home, and we ought to listen to them.

But Mr. Pipes holds that Syria, and by association the Soviets, are only really concerned with the elimination of Israel, and until that seems imminent, they will not come to the table. So, he says, we must wait for a Syrian coup before the peace process can go forward. He could just as well have argued that peace requires a revolution in Washington. Bad as things are, they are not as hopeless as that.

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much the U.S. can affect its policies. Washington has few carrots or sticks for Syria.

Second, although Syria's bellicosity toward Israel receives by far the most attention, this fits a pattern of Syrian territorial claims against all its neighbors. Mr. Assad and other officials often refer to Israel as "Southern Syria" and promise elimination of "false borders" between the two countries to create "one homeland." Rhetoric about Palestinian rights notwithstanding, Mr. Assad aspires to incorporate Israel's territory into Syria.

The same goes for the other neighbors. Mr. Assad frequently declares that "Syria and Lebanon are a single country"—a claim made good by Syrian military control of two-thirds of Lebanon. Official Syrian maps show that a province of Turkey (Alexandretta) belongs to Syria. Syrian military aircraft violated Iraqi airspace three times last month. Damascus denies the very existence of an independent Jordan, terming the state an "artificial entity," its monarchy "illegitimate," and its territory "the land of Syria, part of natural Syria."

### Internal Problems Indicated

Such irredentist mischief usually indicates that a government has internal problems and pursues an aggressive foreign policy to divert attention. Everything known about Syria—including the massacre of some 20,000 residents of Hama in February 1982—confirms the impression that Mr. Assad relies on foreign achievements alone to win popular support. Obviously, a regime with this sort of need does not normally respond to outside pressure: The prospect for the U.S. to succeed in altering Syrian policy appears very dim.

Syrian-Israeli relations do not exist in a vacuum and cannot effectively be treated as though they were. Rather, they must be seen in the context of Syrian anti-Americanism and expansionism. So long as the Syrian regime allies with the Soviet Union and faces widespread domestic opposition, it profits by maintaining a state of war with Israel. Indeed, the conflict helps it remain in power. Turning this equation around, the Arab-Israeli conflict will not terminate until a very different government takes power in Damascus.

Mr. Pipes is the author of *"In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power"* (Colophon Books, 1985) and the editor of the *Harvard Middle East Papers*.

### Correction

In yesterday's article by Daniel Pipes, Hermann Eilts should have been identified as the former U.S. ambassador to Egypt and Michael Sterner as the former U.S. ambassador to the United Arab Emirates.