

SYRIA KILLER

The Peace Process According to Rabinovich

By Daniel Pipes

Itamar Rabinovich has unique credentials for writing about the failed peace talks Syria and Israel held from 1992 to 1996. He is a leading academic specialist on both Syria and Arab-Israeli negotiations, and he served during the 1990s as the Israeli ambassador to the United States and as Israel's chief negotiator with Syria.

The result is that his new study, *The Brink of Peace*, stands as a model of its genre: a book in which an aware participant provides both the inside skinny and the larger story—both the details known only to those who were there and the historical context—of what he rightly calls “an absorbing saga,” neither burdening the reader with unnecessary information nor skimming on important facts.

As his title implies, however, Rabinovich also has a thesis: that Hafez al-Assad, the Syrian president, had in principle accepted peace with Israel and that the two states reached “the brink of peace.” If Assad had only acted more urgently, Rabinovich holds, the two sides could have reached a deal and their conflict by now would be well on the way to solution.

Unfortunately, Assad conducted himself, in Rabinovich's view, “as if time were no constraint.” This left the Labor government of Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Rabinovich himself to face the May 1996 elections without having secured a deal with Syria—which proved, in turn, one

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cause of the Labor party's defeat by Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud.

Rabinovich surmises that, after the elections, “Assad must have realized that he had badly miscalculated.” He speculates that “Assad grasped fully” that he had missed an opportunity to

conclude a deal with Israel. We might call this the optimistic interpretation of Assad's intentions: The dictator

of Damascus genuinely wished to end the conflict with Israel, but his own tactical errors prevented him from doing so.

There is, however, another interpretation, the pessimistic one, which holds that Assad wasn't really seeking to end the state of war with Israel. He entered into negotiations with his enemy only as a means to improve relations with the West. America demanded a less hostile attitude toward the Jewish state, so he did what he had to do. But he never intended to sign a peace treaty with Israel. He wanted not closure but protraction, not peace but peace process.

To his credit, Rabinovich—though partisan to the optimistic view—does not shape the facts to buttress his argument. Indeed, he provides much evidence to support the pessimistic outlook. He recounts, for example, how Assad demanded that the issue of normalization (that is, what sort of peace the two countries would establish) be discussed only at the multilateral Arab-Israeli talks that he himself happened to be boycotting.

Equally, Rabinovich doesn't sanitize Assad's views (“Israel remained a rival, if not an enemy”) or hide his own perplexity at Assad's actions. *The*

Brink of Peace is littered with phrases like “we were deeply puzzled,” “It is difficult to understand Assad's conduct,” and “Many of Assad's decisions during this period have yet to be fully explained.” Rabinovich candidly sums up his own implicit dissatisfaction with the optimistic analysis: “When all is said and done it is difficult to understand why Assad, despite his suspicions, reservations, and inhibitions, failed to take the steps that would have produced an agreement.”

Rabinovich recounts how this puzzle eventually led the Israeli prime minister to adopt—despite a belief in the possibility of a treaty with Damascus—the pessimistic view that Assad did not want to deal with Israel. For Rabin, “Assad's negotiating style and the substance of his positions” showed that the Syrian president “was not interested in genuine negotiation but rather in an American mediation or arbitration.” Indeed, Rabinovich himself seems driven at last to the pessimistic interpretation, concluding that “Assad was more interested in obtaining a clear Israeli commitment to a withdrawal from the Golan than in coming to an agreement.” He even refutes his book's optimistic title when he concludes that “at no time” in his four years of negotiating “were Israel and Syria on the verge of a breakthrough.”

Rabin and Rabinovich alike find themselves forced toward the pessimistic interpretation because, no matter how positive their outlook, this interpretation makes better sense. If one assumes that Assad had no intention of signing an agreement with Israel, all the puzzle about his actions is swept away and his supposed miscalculations are revealed as canny decisions.

But however much logic forces him in the direction of pessimism, Rabinovich resists it. In a key passage, he explains how he can persist in his optimism:

I was not perturbed by the fact that . . . Assad was primarily interested in transforming his country's

relationship with Washington, and that his acceptance of the notion of peace with Israel was a necessary prelude to that transformation and not the product of a change of heart with regard to us. If a mutually acceptable compromise could be found and an agreement made, the change of heart would follow.

In other words, *Assad's intentions do not matter, for Israel could eventually co-opt the Syrians into a peaceful and civilized relationship.* Rabinovich never explains the mechanics by which this “change of heart” would occur—and that is not surprising, for it is a hope, not a plan. Rabinovich and his political superiors wanted a peace agreement with Damascus so badly, they were willing to believe that a “compromise” would eventually fix the problems staring them in the face. They may have looked like hard-nosed planners, but they were in fact pinning their country's future on a wish and a prayer.

This, finally, is what gave Israel's negotiations with the Syrians (and by

extension, with the other Arabs, especially the Palestinians) an indulgent quality. *The Brink of Peace* shows, for instance, that the Israeli negotiators never raised the fact that Israel had won all its wars against Syria, as though to do so would have been ill-mannered and tactless. Likewise, the Israelis never mentioned the fact that, during the Cold War, Israel threw in its lot with the victorious United States, while Syria moved in orbit of the vanished Soviet Union.

As a result, instead of a chastened Damascus petitioning its victor, the talks exude a sense of parity, with the Syrians making demands and acting as Israel's equal. Presumably, Israel's leaders let the Syrians get away with this (with American encouragement) in the expectation that on the basis of this make-believe, “the change of heart would follow.”

The same motive probably explains the Labor government's surprising tendency to accept Assad's positions as though he were sincerely

pursuing amity rather than tactically finding a publicity advantage. When Assad suddenly proposed implementing a Syrian-Israeli agreement not over the many years Rabin had proposed, but immediately, Rabinovich portrays the proposal as a serious bid for peace—“He was evidently worried by the passage of time”—instead of a coy trick to have Israel blamed for turning down a chance for instant peace.

In the same spirit, Rabinovich shows Israeli leaders accepting at face value Assad's fatuous statements about the need to find a peace “with dignity.” Rather than present Assad as a crafty thug desperate to hold on to power in the face of murderous domestic opposition, Rabinovich presents Assad's “philosophy” of the negotiations. A reader who knows nothing about Middle Eastern politics could finish *The Brink of Peace* and never obtain any clear sense that Syria's totalitarian system differs from Israel's liberal democracy.

Itamar Rabinovich is a sophisticated historian and diplomat, and the Rabin-Peres governments he worked for had an ambitious vision of conflict resolution for their country. Unfortunately—as *The Brink of Peace* shows despite itself—their efforts were premised not on plans, but merely hopes. ♦



AP/Wide World Photos / Nati Hamnik

Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin listen to a debate in the Knesset, May 5, 1995.