

# Looking Beyond the Golan Heights

## *Examining the True Impediments to a Syrian-Israeli Peace*

*Khaled Al-Sharikh & James Kennedy*

Aside from Lebanon, which has been in a unique predicament since the start of its civil war in 1975, the only neighboring country that has not yet signed a peace treaty with Israel is the Syrian Arab Republic. Although Egypt made peace with Israel in 1979 and Jordan did so in 1994, Syria has yet to follow suit, and so the two countries technically remain in a state of war to this day. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948, the two nations have fought three major wars and have had several altercations by proxy in Lebanon. Israel and Syria essentially did not communicate between the Six Day War in 1967 (in which Israel captured the contentious Golan Heights from Syria) and 1991, when delegations from the two nations finally met at the Madrid Conference. Since then, the peace process has moved slowly, nearly stalling within the past eight years. While it would be easy to claim that the Golan Heights, which remains in Israeli hands, is the sole cause for the propagation of this international stalemate, in truth the situation is far more complicated. While both the issue of the Golan Heights and Syria's continued support for militant groups and its alliance with Iran may seem like insurmountable obstacles, in actuality, these issues are hardly as impossible to solve as they are made out to be. Instead, the true reason for the lack of a Syrian-Israeli peace is because of the current political climate and the often-overlooked issue of geographical circumstance that make forging a comprehensive peace much more difficult to obtain than it was for Israel to with both Egypt and Jordan.

### **Part One: Assessing the intractability of obstacles to peace**

When it comes to a Syrian-Israeli peace, there is a common belief that there are only two intractable obstacles: the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights and Syrian support for what Israel considers to be terrorist groups, including Hezbollah and Hamas. While these are indeed difficult issues, they are by no means unsolvable. There is little disagreement that a Syrian-Israeli track to peace would be far simpler than addressing the intricacies of the Palestinian question, since it is simply a territorial disagreement rather than a complex historical conflict involving the sensitive issue of the "right of return" and

the status of holy, coveted Jerusalem. In fact, there have been instances in the past, especially after the 1991 Madrid Conference where peace between the two nations was but a signature away, and particularly at the meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian President Hafez al-Assad at Shepherdstown, West Virginia in 2000.

In this modern era, where land for peace seems to be the accepted framework, it is the occupation of the Golan Heights that drives this superficial wedge between Syria and Israel. Since its stunning victory in the Six Day War of 1967, Israel has maintained a firm grip over the Golan Heights, which resulted in the extension of Israeli law to the region in 1981, essentially constituting a de facto annexation. Although various UN resolutions, including Resolution 242, have called on Israel to withdraw from this occupied territory, Israel has allegedly kept the Golan Heights for two reasons: the region's militarily strategic location and the water resources of the Sea of Galilee, which provides 15% of Israel's water.

It is true that the Golan Heights is extremely strategic in that it provides an elevated view of Israel, Syria and Lebanon. Indeed, Mount Hermon (or Jabal al- Shaykh) is at the exact point where the three nations currently meet. Prior to the war of 1967, Syria used the elevation of the Golan Heights to shell neighboring Israeli cities, and this shelling was used both as a bargaining tool throughout their negotiations over the demilitarized zone post-1948 and in the buildup to the Six Day War. Mount Hermon also serves as an excellent surveillance outpost since it provides such an elevated view, at a height of around 3,000 ft.

However, the past 40 years have seen great technological advances, especially in the military. In the age of satellites, laser-guided missiles and complete Israeli military superiority over Syria's outdated and deficient armed forces, the Golan Heights in Syrian hands no longer represents a military threat to Israel. Even if Syria were to control the region, it would never dare to invade Israel again because of its incredible deterrent in its excellent military capabilities, including the nuclear weapons which Israel is widely believed to possess (the Israeli government neither confirms nor denies this). Indeed, even the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon stated in 2004 that the Golan Heights no longer poses a strategic threat to Israel and that Israel would be better served by a peace agreement with Syria<sup>1</sup>. Syria has even agreed in the past to maintain only a small military presence in the region as long as Israel does the same on the other side. A comprehensive, final peace with Syria would be a boon to Israel's security. This would not only hinder the supply and support for militant groups, but it would also almost certainly provide final borders for the State of Israel over 60 years

after the nation was established, since Lebanon would undoubtedly come in line after its dominant Syrian neighbor. It would also help facilitate peace between Israel and the rest of the Arab world, especially Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, because it would be in line with the Arab Peace Initiative, a plan adopted in 2002 by the Arab League which stipulates that, in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories, all Arab states would normalize relations with Israel (however, a solution to the Palestinian question would be required as part of the plan as well). Finally, Syria's pursuit of peace with Israel would drive a wedge between Iran and Syria, potentially robbing Iran of its strongest ally and would further marginalize the Iranian regime. In fact, it could even provide a basis for cooperation between Israel and the Arab world in the face of a common threat in Iran, and further smooth the progress of peace between the nations.

The second issue of contention is frequently ignored, but forms a much bigger obstacle. In a region in which fresh water is a rare commodity, much has been made of the Golan Heights' water resources. The Sea of Galilee currently provides Israel with 15% of its water. The Banias Spring, which originates from Mount Hermon on the Golan Heights, provides approximately 100 million cubic meters of water to Israel a year.<sup>2</sup> Negotiations in Shepherdstown, West Virginia between Prime Minister Barak and President al-Assad broke down over a mere 200 meters on the northeast shore of the Sea of Galilee. Israelis fear that if Syria were to control the Sea of Galilee, it would leave far too much power in the hands of a Syrian regime that has historically been hostile to Israel. This, they argue, means that Syria might attempt to choke Israel through its water supply by polluting the water or placing a dam so that the sea would not flow into the Jordan River.

Prior to the Six Day War of 1967, Syria had indeed attempted to divert the Golan's Banias Spring from Israel, and this was one of Israel's main motivations for going to war. However, any future attempts to do something similar would require approximately two to three years to implement. Considering the proximity of the Golan Heights to Israel's pre-1967 borders, Israel could very easily conduct a surgical strike on any pumps or dams placed on the Banias Spring<sup>3</sup>. However, there would likely be no need for such military maneuvers. The "Rabin deposit," as the proposal made by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1994 to the Syrians regarding the Golan Heights is commonly called, included water-sharing agreements along with an Israeli withdrawal within three to five years and a demilitarization of the region.<sup>4</sup> Agreement over the water resources of the Golan Heights is achievable by giving Syria complete control over the occupied region, while maintaining an outside enforcer, such as the United Nations, to make sure that all aspects of the agreement are

respected. Therefore, this seemingly intractable issue is indeed very solvable and does not pose that strong an obstacle to peace between the two nations. In fact, water-sharing could be a source of co-dependence because Israel has the technology to pump the water while Syria would have control over the water resources.

In response to Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights and Syria's comparative military weakness, Syria has opted to support terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah as a means of putting pressure on the Jewish state. This has proven quite the thorn in Israel's side, since Hamas is now in control of the Gaza Strip, and Hezbollah was not defeated in the 2006 war in Lebanon as Israel had planned; Hezbollah primarily survives on heavy support, both financially and militarily, from Syria and Iran. The Syrian regime vociferously supports Hezbollah's political movement as part of the March 8 movement in Lebanon, and Damascus hosts the offices of several groups considered terrorist organizations by some, including, until recently, the offices of Khaled Meshaal, the head of the political bureau of Hamas. Syria has also firmly maintained a strong alliance with Iran in order to supply and fund these groups.

Asymmetric warfare has become Syria's only bargaining chip. In exchange for the return of the Golan Heights, peace and the prospect of economic prosperity, Syria has shown that it is more than willing to give up support of these organizations and, vicariously, its relationship with Iran. President al-Assad has said on several occasions that economic prosperity is key to his platform of modernization.<sup>5</sup> With the guaranteed financial windfall that would result from the removal of sanctions implemented by the United States, an increase in foreign direct investment from Western nations, and economic cooperation with Israel, he could finally pursue his economic development and liberalization policies. The issue of Syria's influence in Lebanon is closely tied to its support of terrorist groups since it uses Hezbollah for the purposes of extending its influence. However, just as it was willing to withdraw from Lebanon in 2005 in response to the international outcry resulting from former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination, Syria would be willing to scale back its influence in Lebanon, if not remove it completely, for the sake of regaining the Golan Heights and economic prosperity. Syria has shown itself in the past to be a pragmatic player willing to alter its policies based on what is in its interests. The secular, Arab nationalist Syrian regime does not have so strong an ideological or religious affiliation with Hamas, Hezbollah or Iran that it would be willing to forego its own interests for their sake. In fact, Israel could even provide an incentive for Syria to rein down on Hezbollah by giving them control of the Shebaa Farms, land which is occupied by Israel,

claimed by Hezbollah and legally, per the United Nations, belonging to Syria. Such a transfer of control would inevitably cause a rift in the axis of Syria and Iran, vicariously diminishing Iran's influence in the region.

An interesting development has taken place in the past few weeks as major regional news outlets, including the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Rai* and the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*, that Khaled Meshaal of Hamas has relocated from his offices in Damascus to Sudan. On September 2, it was reported that Meshaal had moved to Khartoum at the request of the Syrian government<sup>6</sup>. Hamas

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later denied that this had occurred, and further reports have been conflicting. If Meshaal has indeed left Damascus at the behest of Syria, then it is probable that Hamas would not want the news to be widely spread because it indicates that Hamas is losing support from Syria. Syria would not necessarily want to publicize these cut ties either because it would be politically risky to appear as though the regime is neglecting the Palestinian cause. But if Assad did ask Meshaal to move, the action speaks for itself. By distancing itself from the extremism associated with Hamas, Syria is clearly anticipating a major response from Israel, and since Syrian support for Hamas was a major obstacle in negotiations with the Israeli government, he is likely to get one.

## **Part Two: Assessing the True Impediments to Peace**

A peace agreement between Syria and Israel will certainly have to address all of the aforementioned issues; the Golan Heights, water resources, and Syria's support for terrorist groups will make up the bulk of the agreement. As we have demonstrated, these issues, though complex, are in fact completely surmountable challenges. Negotiating teams would have to work hard, but it is likely that both parties could reach an agreement that would be acceptable to both sides. How then can we explain the lack of a Syrian-Israeli peace accord during the past sixty years? The answer is not that the issues are unsolvable, but instead that there has not yet been a time when the circumstances were conducive to a peace agreement.

A successful peace agreement consists of more than a signed piece of paper. While extensive preparation, skillful diplomacy and innovative solutions to intractable issues are all crucial components of successful peace negotiations, there are other *circumstantial* factors that must be considered. We believe



that there are four factors that are of tremendous importance to a nascent peace deal. Firstly, there must be leaders on both sides deeply committed to peace, and they must be willing to take political and tangible risks in the interests of peace. Oftentimes, there must also be a third party to help bring the former enemies together at the negotiating table,. Additionally, there must be mutual respect on both sides, which can be an incredibly difficult thing to achieve when animosity is deeply rooted on both sides. Finally, there should be potential areas of cooperation so that both nations have joint projects and common interests in order to foster communication and growing respect.

### **I. Lack of Leadership Committed to Making Peace**

The importance of having two leaders who truly believe that peace is in their best interests cannot be overstated. There is no doubt that lack of such leaders is playing a large role in preventing any progress toward Syrian-Israeli peace. On both sides of this conflict, we find a clear lack of leadership willing to take the initiative and move the process along towards comprehensive peace. More importantly, those leaders must illustrate that they are willing to make painful compromises for the sake of a just agreement. Although the concept seems fundamental enough, it must be remembered that there are reasons why peace is so elusive, and likewise there are reasons why leaders in conflict do not simply change course and issue declarations of peace. History has illustrated that making such an abrupt about-face can come with great costs, including ending the political career of such a leader, and in some cases, such action results in the death of those leaders.

There is no better illustration of the importance of leadership strongly committed to peace than Anwar Sadat, who succeeded Gamal Abdul Nasser as president of Egypt after Nasser's death in 1970. Although Sadat presided over the surprise attack that started the Yom Kippur War in 1973, he would deliver a speech in the Israeli Knesset a mere four years later. His announcement that he was willing to visit Jerusalem came as a complete surprise, and no one, not even Sadat, was sure of what the response would be. He realized that there was a psychological barrier between Israel and the rest of the Arab world which had to be overcome before a true peace deal could even begin to be discussed.<sup>7</sup> Many in the Middle East condemned this action, and Egypt was expelled from the Arab League after peace was made with Israel because the Arab nations did not approve of this unilateral action, instead believing that peace with Israel should only be made if the Arab nations acted as a unified body. The costs did not stop there, and the entire process ended on a sour note when Sadat was assassinated in 1981 by Egyptian Islamist extremists. Perhaps this has frightened other leaders away from taking such visionary steps, and

unfortunately, the current leadership in Syria and Israel seem unwilling to take the first steps toward peace, resulting in the diplomatic stalemate that has existed for the greater part of Israel's existence.

In many ways, Bashar al-Assad has not yet been able to show his true colors on foreign policy. The Syrian track has not yet been truly pursued since he came to office following the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, in 2000. Since Hafez had been in power since 1970, almost all previous attempts at negotiating between the two nations went through him, and his strong personality played a role in all of the developments.<sup>8</sup> His son, however, has not had a true opportunity to assert himself. Some are pessimistic that he will pursue a different foreign policy than his father, saying that ultimately, Bashar is the product of the system built by his father, and that he will "protect the core constituencies of the Assad regime."<sup>9</sup> While this may be true, it should also be remembered that Bashar was not groomed his entire life for the post, and was instead educated in London as he trained to be an ophthalmologist. Likely, it is not so much that he shares his late father's vision on every foreign policy issue, but rather that he is merely attempting to maintain stability in Syria. Many say that Bashar wants reform, but that he wants to pursue it at a steady pace in order to prevent chaos from breaking out.

There is, however, one school of thought that suggests that Bashar al-Assad does not actually want to reach a peace agreement with Israel because, some people argue, it is in the best interests of the Alawite regime to maintain a state of conflict with Israel, at least in name. The gaze of Syrians would turn from the Golan Heights to Syria's domestic issues, and a desire for political and economic liberalization would be likely to follow, and this could run contrary to the interests of the current regime. Currently, Syria is spending about 65 to 70 percent of its budget on the army,<sup>10</sup> and although with peace, a substantial amount of this money could be freed up for domestic spending on infrastructural improvement, this would most likely lead to a reassessment of the political situation within Syria. While many feel comfortable immediately throwing this idea into the realm of conspiracy theories, dismissing such an idea, especially in light of the rational actions that Syria has always pursued, would be naïve. Whether Bashar truly desires peace or not, it is safe to say that he is unlikely to suddenly travel to Jerusalem. Such a sudden challenge to the status quo is likely to upset the system and to threaten the stability that the Ba'athist regime has been determined to maintain.

The leadership on the Israeli side of the equation is just as disheartening. The Israeli political system is fickle at best, and since 1988, no political party has managed to maintain a coalition government for a full four-year term of the Knesset.<sup>11</sup> While some argue that these frequent exchanges of power prevent

any one party from dominating the system, it also makes it very difficult to make major shifts in foreign policy. It takes a very charismatic leader to break this cycle and truly try to alter the status quo. The quintessential example of this was Prime Minister Rabin, who made great strides toward peace with both the Palestinians and the Syrians, and, like Egyptian President Sadat, paid for his actions with his life. He was assassinated by a right-wing Israeli who was vehemently opposed to the Oslo peace process.

Unfortunately for the peace process, Ehud Olmert – the current prime minister of Israel, at least when this article was written – lacks the political capital to continue working toward peace with Syria. Olmert's entire tenure as prime minister has been unusual from the beginning. He assumed the post after the death of Ariel Sharon, and has since presided over the controversial war against Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006, the ongoing situation with Hamas in the Gaza Strip (which has recently tied up a great deal of Israel's military resources), as well as the fallout from the March 2008 shooting at the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva, a Jewish seminary in Jerusalem. Although indirect negotiations with Syria through Turkish mediation have taken place recently and both sides have publicly expressed a desire for peace, it is very clear that Olmert does not have enough credibility or support to mount a true attempt at serious negotiations with the Syrian government.

One might think that it is fortunate, then, that Olmert has announced his intention to resign as prime minister of Israel. However, this may not necessarily be the best thing for the peace process. While Tzipi Livni has defeated the more hawkish Shaul Mofaz in the Kadima Party's internal elections for leader of the party, chances are high that she will be unable to form a stable coalition, necessitating general Knesset elections. This means that the door is wide open for a power shift, and it is very likely that someone with a clear dislike for the current peace process, such as Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu, could soon be at the helm of the nation. Olmert may then have a couple of months before he truly steps down (most likely to face criminal charges for his alleged corruption), and he might very well provide one final push for an agreement with Syria. However, it is unlikely that something as controversial as forsaking the Golan Heights could be achieved before that day comes.

## **II. Lack of a Third Party Committed to Making Peace**

Considering their historically poor interaction with one another, both as partners at the negotiating table and as neighbors, Syria and Israel cannot be expected to reach a total and comprehensive peace agreement independently. Although the role of mediator has occasionally been assumed by other nations



– such as Turkey and France in the current negotiations – the job almost always falls to the United States due to its status as the current world hegemon. In the past, the United States has made honest attempts at brokering peace, such as in the 1978 Camp David summit between Egypt and Israel, which eventually led to normalization of relations between the two nations. It was clear that President Carter was sincere in his desire for peace and that he genuinely wanted to participate in the conference.<sup>12</sup> The United States also managed to bring Syria and Israel to the table before, in the 1991 Madrid Conference, along with Lebanon and Jordan, whose delegation included a delegation of Palestinians. In those days, the reputation of the United States abroad was far more prestigious, and many countries perceived it as a fair mediator.

Sadly, this is simply not the case today. It is clear from the official rhetoric of the current administration of President George W. Bush that the United States does not plan on being an unbiased mediator between Israel and Syria at any point in the near future. Instead of bringing the two countries to the negotiating table, like his father did during the Madrid Conference of 1991, President Bush has instead increased the international isolation of Syria by calling it “out of step” with other nations in the region and by placing it on the Axis of Evil.<sup>13</sup> Under the Bush administration, the United States has backed up this rhetoric with concrete action. In 2003, Congress passed the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSA) warning Syria to end its support of terrorism and to end its military occupation of Lebanon. Shortly thereafter, President Bush signed an executive order implementing sanctions that severely limited Syria’s ability to import U.S. goods and prevented any Syrian air carrier from landing a plane on U.S. soil. The bill requires the Secretary of State to submit a report to Congress every year about the progress of Syria towards meeting the conditions that SALSA establishes. These grand gestures are unlikely to have any effect other than to continue pushing Syria down its path of isolation. In the meantime, the United States has continued its steadfast support of Israel, explicitly granting Israel the moral high ground, creating a diplomatic hierarchy in which Syria, as a member of the infamous axis of evil, is to be forced to give in to Israeli demands.

Not surprisingly, the perception within Syria is that the United States has no interest in attaining a comprehensive peace agreement between the two nations. Faisal Mekdad, the Syrian deputy foreign minister and the highest-ranking Syrian to attend the now-seemingly ill-fated Annapolis conference of 2007, believes that the actions of the second Bush administration have completely stopped any movement on the peace track.<sup>14</sup> For Mekdad, the main policy of the Bush administration is “that there should be no peace in

the Middle East.”<sup>15</sup> He blames the United States for protecting Israel and for providing weapons to it. He also articulated Syria’s criticism of the Annapolis conference, calling it a last-ditch effort at the end of Bush’s term. To Mekdad and the rest of the Syrian government, it was as if Bush suddenly “remembered that there was something to be tackled in the Middle East.”<sup>16</sup>

As previously mentioned, there have been some attempts at mediation through Turkey recently, with both sides confirming that indirect negotiations have been taking place over the past year, but as of yet, they have not even met at the same place yet, indicating that there is still much ground to be covered. France, under the guidance of President Nicolas Sarkozy, has recently developed a cordial relationship with Syria and has been to a great extent successful in starting to draw Syria out of its international isolation. Sarkozy is also attempting to organize direct Israeli-Syrian negotiations.<sup>17</sup> France has been gaining a lot of credibility on the international scene with Sarkozy’s highly publicized establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean and his apparently successful negotiations with Russia regarding the crisis in Georgia. With this legitimacy and Sarkozy’s charisma, France may very well be able to jumpstart these negotiations. However, a deal would ultimately need United States assistance, as Israel and Syria clearly expect it, and because the United States wields so much power in the region that its help would be necessary. If the United States has any interest in actively promoting and achieving a comprehensive peace deal between Syria and Israel, the first thing it must do is stop issuing veiled threats toward Syria. Such actions have certainly destroyed any legitimacy the United States may have had as an honest peace broker, and it will take years for that image to be rebuilt under the right leadership. If the United States chooses to maintain its polarized view of the world, and treats Syria as a rogue nation instead of as a respected member of the international community, it will find Syria incredibly stubborn in its positions and increasingly resistant to any attempts made at peace.

### **III. Lack of Mutual Respect**

Nations are proud entities as a rule, and this phenomenon seems even more natural in countries in the Middle East. The region was the site of the early development of human civilization, and all its nations are immensely proud of their long histories. Because of this, it is imperative that any nation seeking favorable relations with another nation in the Middle East must show respect, or their attempts at fostering cordial relations will be rebuked. Therefore, it follows that any peace involving any Middle Eastern nation must stem out of true respect. Syria is no exception to this rule, and it will not be forced by Israel into a peace agreement that it does not wish to sign. Neither nation

has ever offered a positive picture of the other, so even such a simple gesture will eventually amount to some tangible, and highly-valued, international respect.

There is a clear lack of respect on the part of Israel toward Syria. It is not necessary to look further than a recent example of Israel violating the sovereignty of Syria. While many details of the event on September 6, 2007 are unclear, a few things are certain. Israeli jets entered Syrian airspace, bombed a facility near Deir ez-Zor, and then ejected fuel tanks over Turkey.<sup>18</sup> After this was revealed to the world, both sides were conspicuously silent, although a number of theories emerged in the Western media over the following days, with explanations of the target ranging from “weapons destined for Hezbollah militants”<sup>19</sup> to “a nuclear facility constructed in Syria with North Korean aid.”<sup>20</sup> Although the identity of the target is still not clear today, what is clear is that there was a violation of Syrian airspace without explanation, which is not an action that any party truly interested in peace would undertake.

This was not the first time that Israel has violated Syrian airspace and

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attacked targets on Syrian soil. In 2003, Israel launched its first airstrike against Syria in 20 years when it hit what it claimed was a terrorist training camp only 10 miles from Damascus.<sup>21</sup> As if that were not threatening enough, Israeli planes struck even closer to the Syrian consciousness when warplanes buzzed President al-Assad’s palace

in the coastal city of Latakia in 2006.<sup>22</sup> Both of these were in response to terrorism within Israel and were intended to serve as warnings against Syria aiding militants who attack civilians, but ultimately these serve no purpose other than to escalate tensions between the two countries. These attacks have been in conjunction with numerous examples of inflammatory rhetoric from Tel Aviv, often in the form of thinly veiled threats. In 2004, IDF Chief of Staff Ya’alon said that countries that support terrorism “cannot sleep quietly at night,” and then went on to mention Syria as one of those countries.<sup>23</sup> Ceasing such blatant violations of sovereignty would be a good start for a nation that claims to desire peace.

However, not all of the blame should be placed on Israel. Syria also does not treat the state of Israel with any respect. First of all, it does not even officially recognize Israel, and there is nothing more immature in the realm of international relations than not recognizing that another country exists, especially when said country has been around for sixty years. Secondly, Syria

has utilized inflammatory rhetoric of its own on numerous occasions. In 2003, in response to the aforementioned attack on the suspected terrorist training camp, then-Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara – currently the vice president – warned Israel not to carry out any more attacks and hinted at a possible military response, saying that “[Syria has] many cards that we have not played. Don’t forget that there are many Israeli settlements in the Golan. I am not exaggerating but I am describing things as they might happen.”<sup>24</sup> Clearly such statements are completely counterproductive; as it is understood that Syria would never strike against Israel, statements like these will only give Israel more legitimacy in its own military actions that may violate Syrian sovereignty in the future. If reports that the target attacked by Israel in Deir ez-Zour was a nascent nuclear facility are accurate, this would be yet another ill-advised move on Syria’s part. Not only did Israel display Syrian weakness by attacking a target 10 miles from Damascus without a response, but it also confirms the views of Israeli and American hawks that Syria threatens the stability of the region. This serves only as an obstacle to the return of the Golan Heights. Additionally, Syria’s unconditional support for Iran, which has made a habit of making virulently anti-Israel statements, is also counterproductive.

It should be clear that military strikes do not aid the peace cause in any way. Syria is a very proud nation, and it will not subject itself to a peace that is dictated to it. President al-Assad will not accept an agreement that humiliates Syria because it would weaken his international image and the his regime’s control within Syria. Every bomb dropped has the potential of setting the peace process back. The complementing “fighting words” that come out of both Tel Aviv and Damascus may seem like little more than just words, but they have the potential to hinder the peace process if they are used without any regard as to their effect. If peace is to be achieved, it must be reached at a negotiating table, and grow out of respect, not out of fear for further military retaliation.

#### **IV. Lack of Areas for Cooperation**

Most people who foresee an eventual peace deal between Syria and Israel believe that it will be a “cold peace,” meaning that there will be a formal cessation of hostilities and a complete diplomatic recognition of both sides, but little more. While it is not impossible for two countries to make a “cold peace” that requires no further interaction, it is far more likely for peace to develop as a result of repeated interaction on both an official and unofficial level. While official interaction receives more attention, unofficial interaction can be an overlooked asset. If two countries naturally have numerous areas

for cooperation or collaboration, these are likely to translate into personal interactions that will bring the states closer together.

A clear example of this is the situation between Israel and Jordan. The validity of the peace treaty that was signed in 1994 was greatly strengthened by the fact that the two nations had a long history of interaction and had numerous potential realms for continuing cooperation. The two countries had always been inexorably linked; they share a 148-mile long border and mutual concern for Jerusalem, as well as having assisted each other with the difficulties of governing the West Bank.<sup>25</sup> There have been numerous documented occasions in which there was high-level communication between the two nations, and it is even said that Jordan warned the Golda Meir government twelve days before the Yom Kippur War of 1973 broke out that a sneak attack was planned.<sup>26</sup> More relevant to this discussion, however, are the minor projects that the two have undertaken jointly.

Even before the Yom Kippur War, there were low-level exchanges between the two nations. In fact, as early as the 1960s, Israel and Jordan were cooperating over one of the most precious resources in the region: water. Israel invented modern drip irrigation technology in the 1960s. The value of this technology is that it saves approximately 30 to 50 percent of water used in irrigation when compared to conventional systems. Although developed in the Negev Desert by an Israeli company called Netafim, it was sold to Jordanian businessman Sharrif Nasser for US\$36,000. What is even more remarkable is that Sharrif Nasser's nephew was none other than the late King Hussein of Jordan.<sup>27</sup>

There have been numerous other examples of interaction between the two nations at higher levels, most of them taking place long before the peace treaty was signed in the 1990s. In 1970, during the Jordanian Civil War, Israel sent supplies to aid the government.<sup>28</sup> There has also been a joint effort to capitalize on the Dead Sea's mineral deposits, and recently there has even been talk of making an airport straddling the border, to be named the International Peace Airport.<sup>29</sup> Although such interactions are not exactly necessary for peace, it is clear that they do ease the transition period from two countries being enemies to being good neighbors. The problem is that there are fewer areas for cooperation between Israel and Syria than there are between Israel and Jordan.

First of all, the border between Israel and Syria is decidedly smaller than that of Israel and Jordan. If Syria regains the Golan Heights (which will be assumed here because it is unlikely that peace will materialize otherwise), the two would share a border of less than 50 miles. This immediately restricts the number of projects that can be undertaken jointly. The geography of this border is also relevant; while Israel's border with Jordan includes the desert



and the Dead Sea, the Israeli-Syrian border would be mostly either green fields or tumultuous rocky terrain.

A more important problem is the lack of large population centers near the border. The closest city to this border on the Israeli side would be Tiberius, with a population of about 40,000; there are no comparable Syrian cities close to what would be the border between the two nations. In comparison, the area comprising the Israeli city of Eilat and the Jordanian city of Aqaba is home to more than 130,000 Israeli and Jordanian inhabitants. As a result, this area has been where most cross-border exchanges have taken place, even before official peace. The waters of the Gulf of Aqaba (on which both cities lie) had been jointly patrolled to prevent terrorists from entering Eilat, the two airports monitored each other's communications and exchanged information to prevent crashes, and there was even collaboration over mosquito spraying so that the mosquitos would not take refuge on whichever side was not sprayed.<sup>30</sup>

Syria and Israel do not enjoy such geographical blessings. There is, however, a potential for some cooperation over the use of water in the region. Mount Hermon, the source of water for the Jordan River and thus the Dead Sea, is located on the border of the two nations, and its water resources could be the foundation of a mutually beneficial partnership. Syria has gone from conflict to cooperation over water before. For many years, Turkey and Syria had sour relations with each other, fueled by a disagreement over who possessed the Hatay province on their border. Turkey used its control of the Euphrates as leverage in that disagreement. However, the situation has since warmed, and now, the two nations even cooperate over distribution of water from the Euphrates River.<sup>31</sup> However, it currently seems far more likely that Israel will continue to control the Mount Hermon watershed, instead of sharing it with a nation with whom it is technically still at war.

The importance of areas for cooperation cannot be overstated. If used wisely, they can lead to a de facto peace, which brings official peace that much closer. While Jordan and Israel had no shortage of areas for cooperation before and after their peace in 1994, the situation is very different from that of Syria and Israel, which do not have such a large realm of possibilities. Sadly, this means that there will be little Syrian-Israeli contact, and this will make sustainable peace much more difficult to achieve.

## **Conclusion**

It seems that in any given week, the media blows hot and cold on the prospects of peace between Syria and Israel. News agencies will one day report inflammatory rhetoric, and the next day will discuss the possibilities of peace

negotiations in the near future. This shows that the two nations are currently in limbo, stuck between a state of war and a state of peace, and at any given time, either of them appears to be within reach. While the violent nature of the history of the region makes it easier to believe that we are always closer to war than peace, it is unlikely that a conventional, direct war would break out between Syria and Israel. No matter how slow, the momentum between the two nations has been away from a true confrontation and closer to eventual reconciliation. Many in Syria and in Israel know that the seemingly irreconcilable issues are in fact quite solvable. Occasionally, for instance with the mediation attempts of France, the momentum appears to grow, but as has happened in the past, it is entirely possible that it will slow down once again as one or both sides apply the brakes. The reason why it has been so slow is because of the unfortunate political circumstances that have not as of yet proven favorable to an agreement. This is not to say that any peace agreement achieved would be based entirely on luck; a substantial amount of work, both at the negotiating table and in preparation, is required in order to create the right conditions for agreement. However, there are certain factors that make peace more attainable, and when they are met, it will make a lasting peace achievable. The lack of leadership and a third party dedicated to peace, as well as the lack of mutual respect and of areas of cooperation, need to be remedied if a lasting peace between fierce enemies is ever to be achieved.

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