

# Israel-Syria peace talks move ahead

by Jeffrey Steinberg

High-level representatives of the Syrian and Israeli governments met behind closed doors at the Wye Plantation in Maryland Dec. 27-29, for the first of a series of negotiating sessions that many believe will produce a far-reaching peace accord by the spring of 1996. At the conclusion of the talks, hosted by the Clinton administration, the delegates returned home for consultations. On Jan. 3-6, they were to be back in the United States for follow-on talks. On Jan. 10, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher is scheduled to travel to the Middle East.

This intensive diplomacy was initiated within days of the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on Nov. 4. At the Rabin funeral, senior U.S. officials, including President Clinton, conferred with Rabin's successor Shimon Peres, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and other Arab leaders, to chart out a fast track for peace between Israel and Syria. According to Israeli sources, unofficial emissaries from Saudi Arabia and even Iraq were at the Rabin funeral, and all expressed a willingness to abet the reopening of Israel-Syria peace negotiations. Reportedly, President Clinton also received promises of support from the Russian government to exert pressure on Syrian President Hafez al-Assad.

Talks between Tel Aviv and Damascus had broken down early in 1995 over a number of security issues. Prior to his assassination, Prime Minister Rabin had narrowly focussed the Syrian negotiations on security issues.

## Negotiations broadened

But, following his confirmation as prime minister, Shimon Peres broadened the negotiations to include a comprehensive peace accord, encompassing economic ties, energy cooperation, and water management. Following a meeting between Israeli and Syrian Foreign Ministry officials during a Mediterranean-European economic conference in Barcelona, Spain, in November, Peres traveled to Washington for two days of meetings with the Clinton administration. During a Dec. 11 White House meeting with the Israeli prime minister, President Clinton had a 12-minute telephone discussion with President Assad. The next day, it was announced by Secretary of State Christopher that bilateral negotiations would begin in late December near Washington, D.C.

During his visit to Washington, Prime Minister Peres emphasized that much more is at stake in the negotiations than a bilateral peace settlement. By striking a comprehensive peace accord with Syria, Israel would, in effect, have ended the state of conflict in the entire Middle East region. He told the U.S. Congress, during a Dec. 12 address to a joint session, that he envisions a comprehensive regional peace accord before the end of the century, involving all 20 nations of the Mideast, including the Arabian Gulf states. In private discussions at the Pentagon, according to Israeli sources traveling with the prime minister, Peres spoke of a regional security pact, modeled on NATO, that would bring about a permanent end to the conflict in the Mideast.

To achieve this vision of Mideast peace by the year 2000, Prime Minister Peres is willing to make significant concessions to win a quick peace accord with Syria, Israeli sources say. Peres has already indicated that he is willing to completely remove all Israeli forces from the Golan Heights on a much shorter timetable than his predecessor, if the United States will provide sophisticated airborne radar systems to Israel that will allow for monitoring of Syrian military buildups. He has also indicated that Israel will pull its troops out of southern Lebanon, if Syria will take responsibility for cracking down on terrorists in the area that conduct frequent attacks against Israeli territory. By de facto acknowledging Syria's dominant control over Lebanon (for the time being), Peres is laying the basis for Lebanon to be immediately drawn under the umbrella of an Israel-Syria peace deal, thus speeding up the timetable for Israel to secure safe borders on all sides.

Peres assigned one of his most trusted colleagues, Uri Savir, the director-general of the Foreign Ministry, to handle the Wye Plantation talks with Syria's ambassador to Washington, Walid al-Moualem. Savir was the chief negotiator in the Oslo talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization. According to Israeli sources, Savir has developed deep personal ties to the leadership of the PLO, and is convinced that an understanding can be reached among the leaders of Israel and all of the Arab States.

## 'Peace dividends' needed

The challenge is to quickly bring the "peace dividends" to the majority of people in the region, so that the collaboration that has been struck at the leadership level can be established at the grass-roots level as well. If the Israel-Syria deal moves forward, this "peace dividend"—rapid economic development and measurable improvement of the conditions of life for the majority of Arabs and Jews—will pose the greatest challenge of all. This will pit the regional leaders, whether they know it or not, against the British oligarchy, the Club of the Isles, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. And at that moment, the United States will be faced with the greatest challenge yet in this administration's pursuit of just, lasting peace in the Mideast.