

EIR Strategic Studies

Crucial issues taken up in quest for Middle East peace

by Dean Andromidas

A review of developments over the past weeks, culminating in the beginning of formal, U.S.-mediated talks between Israel and Syria at Shepherdstown, West Virginia beginning on Jan. 3, indicates that key issues are now being seriously taken up by the leaders of the two Mideast nations. These issues include protecting the national sovereignty of all those concerned, the emergence of the issue of providing adequate water resources as crucial to any agreement, and dealing with the political fight that has broken out in the region over ending 50 years of conflict.

Many observers, including President William Clinton, caution that a decisive breakthrough will not be made in the current round of negotiations. Others expect a deal to be finalized by late spring, leading to an agreement which would take up to two years to implement. And still others caution that “a lot could happen in between.”

But the role of President Clinton in the maximizing the chances of success, cannot be understated. Clinton is the only political leader who has managed to earn the trust of both Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian President Hafez al-Assad.

The principles of the peace of Westphalia

The astute observer of the talks will notice the complete absence of cheap rhetoric about “protecting human rights,” “democratic principles,” bringing war criminals to justice, and the like, which have characterized the so-called peace conferences sponsored by the British Foreign Office or the U.S. State Department over the last decade.

The fact that, in principle, the foundation of peace rests on upholding national sovereignty is at the core of these negotiations, has been underscored at crucial points by both Syrian and Israeli political leaders. This was clear in the statement by Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Shara on Dec. 15, at the inauguration of the Syrian-Israeli talks. Shara’s statement is worth quoting at some length, because its importance has been ignored or glossed over by the international press.

Shara stated that “it goes without saying that peace for Syria means the return of all its occupied land, while for Israel, peace will mean the end of the psychological fear which the Israelis have been living in as a result of the existence of occupation, which is undoubtedly the source of all adversities and war.

“Hence ending occupation will be balanced for the first time by eliminating the barrier of fear and anxieties, and exchanging it with a true and a mutual feeling of peace and security. Thus the peace which the parties are going to reach will be established on justice and international legitimacy, and thus peace will be the only triumphant after 50 years of struggle.”

Shara later said that the negotiators must make “a peace based on justice and comprehensivity, an honorable peace for both sides that preserves rights, dignity, and sovereignty. Because only an honorable and just peace will be embraced by future generations. And it is the only peace that shall open new horizons for totally new relations between people of the region.”

Shara’s statement is comparable to the Treaty of Westphalia



Left to right: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, President William Clinton, and Foreign Minister Farouk Shara, in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Their talks have been characterized by a refreshing lack of rhetoric, and by serious concern for the vital issues of national sovereignty, water resources, and finding ways to defuse the political conflict.

lia which ended the Thirty Years War of religious conflict that ravaged 17th-century Europe. The Peace of Westphalia underscored the importance of, above all, establishing respect for the sovereignty of the nations formerly at war. Furthermore, that the peace should not be based on exacting retribution, but on the recognition of the honor and dignity of former enemies.

This same concern has been expressed by Israeli Prime Minister Barak. On Dec. 21, a few days after the completion of the first round of talks, Barak let it be known through the Israeli press that he was considering a proposal for establishing an organization for regional cooperation between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Barak has chosen the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the regional organization that now comprises Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, as his model. The principal reason for this choice is that the organization is based on respect for independence and sovereignty, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and a commitment to resolve disputes through peaceful means.

Barak specifically rejected the model of the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, because in practice these organizations have worked to limit, and even attack, national sovereignty. He does not want a repeat of the Kosovo war in the Middle East. Barak's view of these two organizations is reportedly shared by his Arab colleagues, and he is said to believe that the ASEAN model will serve to foster economic cooperation,

because such cooperation would be based on the sovereign decisions of the nations involved.

Water is a vital resource

The issue of provision of adequate water resources is at the center of these negotiations, more so than in previous negotiations between Israel and Egypt or the Palestinians and Jordan. Water is the topic of one of the four technical committees established to carry out the negotiations. The other committees deal with borders, security arrangements, and normalization. Both countries brought their top water experts to the negotiations. A brief review of the water issue demonstrates that a mutually acceptable political and territorial solution is only possible in the context of the types of ideas presented in Lyndon LaRouche's "Oasis Plan" for Middle East peace.

The territorial issues are entirely intertwined with the water issue. A glance at a map (see p. 39) shows that the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights lie astride the upper Jordan River basin, which comprises the upper Jordan River and its tributaries, including the Banias and the Hasbani, which feed directly into Lake Tiberias (Lake Kinneret, as it is known in Israel). Israel draws the vast majority of its water from this system, and Lake Tiberias has served as the major water reservoir for Israel.

The Syrian demand for a return to the June 4, 1967 borders would bring the Syrian border directly to the northeast corner of Lake Tiberias, and would return control to Syria of the Banias and Hasbani tributaries. Furthermore, at one point

along the upper Jordan River itself, the old border crosses the Jordan River.

Israel is demanding that its international border should be the 1923 border between the British Mandate of Palestine and the French mandate of Syria. This is also the border as it was defined in the 1948 plan by the United Nations to partition Palestine, creating an Israeli and a Palestinian state. Under this arrangement, the Syrian border would not reach Lake Tiberias and would not cross the upper Jordan River.

What lies between these two positions is — water. Neither the 1923 border nor the June 4 lines ever constituted an internationally recognized border. The Israeli-supported 1923 border was rendered irrelevant by the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. The border defined by June 4, as demanded by Syria, was the cease-fire line established by the agreement that ended the 1948 war. This was not a peace agreement, and it never ended the technical state of war, which has continued to this day. That agreement left patches of “demilitarized zones” precisely at the strategic points along the upper Jordan River and Lake Tiberias where the fixing of the border was to be left to future negotiations. From 1948 to 1967, these negotiations never materialized, nor was the border issue ever resolved. In fact, the demilitarized zones periodically became points of violent conflict, as both sides attempted to access the water resources in these zones. It was this conflict over water that led directly to the Syrian-Israeli war, which began on June 5, 1967.

Any geographical compromise means an intolerable political compromise for either side. The Syrian regime of President Assad cannot settle for less territory than did his Egyptian or Jordanian counterparts, which included all the territory they lost as a result of the 1967 war. For Prime Minister Barak, a compromise that appears to pose a danger to Israel’s water supply, would make it almost impossible to get any peace agreement passed in a national referendum to which Barak might have to submit it.

Israeli military commentator Ze’ev Schiff wrote recently in the daily *Ha’aretz*, “Barak understands that the water issue is the one that will decide the result of the referendum. It would be difficult to deceive anyone on on this issue. . . . For this reason, Barak must place special emphasis on the subject of water.”

New water resources on the agenda

The question of water cannot be negotiated as a zero-sum game, simply because there is not enough water to go around. Therefore, the question of creating new water resources, as proposed in the LaRouche “Oasis Plan,” must become “the idea whose time has come.”

There are indications that aspects of these ideas are being brought into the peace process.

Schiff wrote that President Clinton would be prepared to

promise Israel water desalination facilities as compensation for conceding Syria’s full territorial claims.

Furthermore, according to various sources, there has been a revival of the old Johnston Plan, as Israeli and Syrian policy-makers grapple with the question of water-sharing.

Such a discussion would be extremely important. The Johnston Plan was a regional water-sharing and development scheme devised under the initiative of President Dwight Eisenhower in 1953, as a means to defuse conflicts over water. The plan called for the creation of a regional authority, not unlike the Tennessee Valley Authority, which would oversee not only the allocation of water quotas to the various countries, but would foster the development of the Jordan River basin as a means of increasing the water resources of the region. The plan also dovetailed with Eisenhower’s Atoms for Peace program, which called for the development of nuclear energy in the region for desalination. Although the final plan had been accepted by the technical committees of all the countries involved, it was rejected for “political reasons.” That rejection helped lay the foundations of the subsequent Middle East wars.

According to sources close to the Syrians, President Assad wants the water issue to be discussed not simply as a bilateral issue, but on a multilateral, regional basis, and would include Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. The inclusion of Turkey would be crucial for two reasons: First, it is a source of additional water that could be diverted to the region, and second, it would help resolve the current dispute between Turkey and Syria over dam projects that Turkey is building in the upper Euphrates River, which is the strategic source of water for Syria. Moreover, it would bring Iraq, which has a similar dispute with Turkey over the Tigris River, into the peace process. Also, in December Syria announced that it will reestablish diplomatic relations with Iraq for the first time since the Iran-Iraq War in 1980-88.

In a parallel development, Syria and Jordan have announced their plan to build the Unity Dam on the Yarmouk River, just above the point where the Yarmouk flows into the lower Jordan and becomes the border between Israel and Jordan. The project had been part of the Johnston Plan but was never completed after its first foundations were destroyed by the Israelis in June 1967. The decision, in part, is a testament to the relaxation of tensions which have dominated the region since 1948.

The fight against destabilization

Parallel to the current negotiations, is a major political fight raging inside Syria and Israel, as well as in Lebanon. The last is expected to join the peace talks soon. Measures have been taken in all three countries to pre-empt the political destabilization that will be launched by the British and their geopolitical puppets, to sabotage any peace agreement.

According to press reports, Syrian authorities have con-

ducted a crackdown on Islamic fundamentalist groups, particularly the Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami (the Islamic Independence Party). As is the case with most Islamic terrorist groups, it maintains an office in London. Syrian security sweeps in Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs left several Syrian security officers dead. In addition, Syrian authorities moved against the political base of Rifaat Assad, President Assad's brother, who, back in the 1980s, attempted to overthrow the President. While Rifaat is said to live in France and Spain, and to be involved in the Middle East drug trade, his son maintains an Arab TV station based in London that has been issuing anti-Assad propaganda against his uncle, the President.

In Lebanon, government troops clashed with an Islamic terrorist group, Takfir Wal Hijra, north of the Lebanese city of Tripoli. The group is linked with the above-mentioned Syrian groups as well as similar groups in Egypt, all of which also operate out of London. The clashes left several soldiers and civilians dead, and included the mutilation of two female hostages. In a related incident, a Lebanese Palestinian was killed after he launched a grenade attack against the Russian Embassy in Beirut, supposedly to protest the Russian war in Chechnya. These have been the worst clashes since the end of the Lebanese civil war over a decade ago. Lebanese sources point to the artificial nature of these groups, which have no popular support, but nonetheless say that peace is endangered, and the groups are actively attempting to undermine the Israel-Syria talks.

In Israel, where Barak has been able to outmaneuver his weak political opposition in the Knesset (Parliament), particularly the Likud, a major intelligence war has broken out. It is no secret that a reorganization of the Israel security establishment has been under way since Barak came to power. Given the fact that two-thirds of the agents of the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security service, live in the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the reorganization is a necessity if Barak and his peace policies are to stay alive. The Israelis know that they have to clean out the private intelligence networks which interface, through corruption and political ties, with the government security apparatus.

The 'payments scandal'

The reaction against this cleanout has been highlighted by the eruption of the so-called "payments" scandal against Israeli President Ezer Weizman, at a time when he is using his position as President to promote a peace deal with Syria.

The scandal was started when Israel journalist Yoav Yitzhak presented evidence of payments given to President Weizman from a millionaire based in France. Weizman admits that he received payments, but maintains that there was nothing illegal involved. Now, well-informed sources have told *Ha'aretz* that Ofer and Ya'akov Nimrodi are behind the scandal. (See "Mideast Talks Must Solve Water Resource

Shortage," *EIR*, Dec. 17, 1999 for a look at this father-and-son team.)

Ya'akov Nimrodi, a former Mossad foreign intelligence agent, is one of the most notorious Israeli arms dealers, and he played a key role in former Vice President George Bush's Iran-Contra drugs-for-guns operations. His son Ofer is currently in prison awaiting trial for conspiracy to commit murder, obstruction of justice, and bribery and corruption. The case is an example of how a private intelligence apparatus has extended its tentacles into the highest levels of the security and criminal justice apparatus of Israel.

If the *Ha'aretz* story is true, the Nimrodís were leading a major operation to destabilize the Barak government, an operation that would destroy the peace process. The Nimrodís connections come in two ways: First, is the fact that Yitzhak writes for the daily *Ma'ariv*, which is owned by the Nimrodís. Second, it has been confirmed by the relevant authorities that the Nimrodís met with Weizman last August at his private residence in Caesarea, supposedly to ask the President to officially pardon Ofer Nimrodi for a conviction and jail sentence he received for illegal wiretapping in 1995. Weizman refused, after which the discussion became heated and, according to friends of the President, the Nimrodís told Weizman they would "liquidate Weizman." Furthermore, an ongoing criminal investigation against Ofer Nimrodi is looking into whether Nimrodi was blackmailing Weizman. Nimrodi's intention was not just to go after Weizman, but he was preparing dossiers to go after other senior leaders in the government. In addition, Ofer Nimrodi met with Prime Minister Barak last August, seeking a pardon. Barak also refused.

The evidence being presented against Weizman, by journalist Yitzhak, is so detailed and confidential that it could have only been stolen from the offices of President Weizman's attorney. One of the President's lawyers has filed a complaint accusing a former law partner firm of stealing the documents. Recent investigations of the Nimrodís demonstrate that this type of theft of documents is their stock in trade.

Beyond the threat posed by the destabilization of the countries concerned, are the geopolitical machinations which can be expected if the Syria-Israel talks begin to bear fruit. One senior Israeli intelligence expert warned that the enemies of this process would launch a geopolitical crisis targeting Iran and Iraq. Such a move is reflected in the recent British-sponsored United Nations Security Council resolution calling for the reestablishment of a weapons-inspection team in Iraq. Although backed by the United States, but not by China or Russia, and rejected by Iraq, the resolution is slated to come into effect for implementation by March or April. Thus, a new international "Iraq crisis" could erupt precisely at the time the Israeli-Syrian talks are expected to reach maturity.