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*“Find Me a Way  
to Fudge It”*

**I**N ORDER TO make the strategy of Syria-first work, the United States team spent the fall of 1999 immersing themselves in groundwork, primarily by lubricating the friction points that had lain dormant during the Netanyahu years. A new dynamic was thrown into the mix under Barak, with his promise to withdraw from Lebanon no later than June 2000, and both Ross and Barak gave surety on Israel’s intention, with or without a Syrian agreement, to do just that.<sup>1</sup>

This was a significant leverage point against Syria, which stations approximately 35,000 soldiers in Lebanon and acts as a power broker for the Lebanon-based Shiite resistance group Hezbollah. For many years, Hezbollah has been the only card the weaker Syrians could use to keep Israel uncomfortable with its occupation of the Golan Heights and southern Lebanon. In the face of Barak’s planned unilateral withdrawal, Syria stood to lose its ability to encourage Hezbollah’s proxy attacks against Israeli military forces within occupied Lebanon.

There were also high risks for Israel, should Barak make a

unilateral withdrawal without negotiation. One of them was that resistance groups within Palestine might see the withdrawal as a defeat of the Israeli military, take inspiration from it and themselves turn away from years of negotiations, once again embracing armed struggle as a way of ending Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. At a strategic level, for Barak there was also the possibility that, absent an agreement with Syria to restrain Hezbollah, Hezbollah might shift its attacks from Israeli soldiers occupying Lebanon to civilian targets in northern Israel and Jewish settlers in the Golan Heights. This could easily provoke a retaliatory Israeli military strike on Syria proper, which had not occurred since 1974.<sup>2</sup>

The Syrians, Barak knew, have dilapidated Soviet military hardware that is no match for Israel's modern, nuclear-equipped forces. Barak publicly accused the Syrians of possessing chemical and biological weapons, which could potentially have escalated into a doomsday confrontation. American intelligence officers, who were aware of Syria's limited capabilities (it has far weaker bio-chem weapons capabilities than other Arab actors in the region, including Egypt), considered Barak's arguments dubious, particularly because Damascus knew that if it attempted to use such weapons it would be subject to a devastating—perhaps nuclear—counterattack. Nevertheless, Barak sought to guard against this possibility by putting Israeli military might on display; he ordered a provocative series of "war against Syria" maneuvers on the Golan Heights, within view of international observers who were reporting to Damascus.<sup>3</sup>

Next, in October 1999, Barak gave "priority-A" designation to new settlements in the Golan Heights, a significant economic bonus that encouraged additional settlement growth by providing for the highest level of government subsidy.<sup>4</sup> Just as it had been the customary practice on the Palestinian track, Barak used settlement expansion on the Golan Heights both as a form of obtaining negotiating lever-

age with Syria and as a means of reassuring right-wing supporters of his government.

Barak's saber-rattling and antagonistic settlement push did not deter Syria's readiness for peace. For Syria, peace with Israel is possible, and it boils down to a single element that rests on a simpler principle: Full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, and thus implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 242, which is based on the international legal principle embodied in Article 2 of the UN Charter, "no acquisition of territory by the use of force."

Only full-territorial withdrawal based on Resolution 242 had brought peace between Israel and Egypt in 1978 and Israel and Jordan in 1994.<sup>5</sup> Syria expects no less: Israel's full withdrawal and subsequent restoration of Syrian territory to the June 4, 1967, line, which was annexed by Israel in 1981 and is now home to a variety of wineries, ski resorts, and a population of roughly 17,000 settlers in thirty-three settlements.

Both Ross and Indyk viewed Syria's willingness to pursue restoration of its territory as major progress and as an improvement on the historical Syrian practice of conjoining its own grievances against Israel with the complex issues facing the Palestinians. Unlike other Arab governments that sought to curry relations with Israel or the United States, Asad had stayed the course of unity, standing watch as the stalwart defender of the cause of Arab nationalism.

Syria stopped measuring its case exclusively alongside Palestine in 1993, when, in Asad's view, Arafat went his own way and secretly signed the Oslo Accords to negotiate with Israel. From Asad's perspective, Oslo would not be defended by later generations of Palestinians, as it did not fulfill basic Palestinian rights.<sup>6</sup> Once Arafat abandoned Syria's side, Asad thenceforth defined comprehensive peace as pertaining only to Israel, Syria, and Lebanon.<sup>7</sup>

After he signed the Oslo Accords, Yitzhak Rabin knew that Syria could still play a spoiler role on the Israeli-Palestinian track. So, from late 1993 to early 1994, while the Israeli-

Jordanian agreement was looming, Rabin sent Asad signals of conciliation, resulting in an event commonly referred to in Arab-Israeli diplomatic vernacular as the “Rabin deposit.”

On August 3, 1993, Rabin told U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher that “Israel is ready for full withdrawal from the Golan Heights provided its requirements on security and normalization are met.” The United States recognized the seriousness of the offer, as full withdrawal would not only end hostilities between Israel and Syria but also pave the ground for normal relations between Syria and the United States, which views Syria (because of its support for Hezbollah) as a “state sponsor of terrorism.” At the personal request of Rabin, Christopher promptly relayed this message to Asad the following day.<sup>8</sup> Asad was skeptical of the move until July 1994, when the Clinton administration provided him with confirmation that Rabin’s reference to “full withdrawal” could indeed be construed as a withdrawal consistent with Resolution 242, specifically, to the June 4, 1967, line.<sup>9</sup>

For Syria, Rabin’s acknowledgment and willingness to define the reference of withdrawal as the June 4, 1967, line was a landmark. During Clinton’s first term, tripartite discussions on the basis of Rabin’s deposit advanced. Barak, too, had contributed significantly to the talks, as Rabin’s chief of staff and then his foreign minister. After Rabin’s 1995 assassination, discussions premised on “the deposit” continued under his immediate successor, Shimon Peres. But like every other constructive measure regarding Middle East peace, progress came to a virtual halt during the 1996-1999 term of Netanyahu.<sup>10</sup>

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**During Albright’s first move to jump-start the Syrian-Israeli talks following the Israeli-Palestinian Sharm signing on September 4, 1999, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shaara relayed**

Syria's sincere desire to conclude an agreement with Barak, remarking in a press conference:

As far as Syria's position is concerned, we believe that Prime Minister Barak belongs to the school of Rabin and that he considers Rabin as his mentor and if he's going to follow his steps, we have the feeling that he is going to endorse what Rabin has deposited with President Clinton. When he does, Syria will be ready to resume the talks where they left off.<sup>11</sup>

Clinton had been told by his advisers that Barak was reluctant to deliver the Rabin deposit. But he wanted to do everything possible to get talks started. So, in true Clinton form, he told his advisers, "Find me a way to fudge it."<sup>12</sup>

What Albright proposed to Asad on Barak's behalf, was to resume official negotiations "with a promise to recognize at a later date the 'promissory note' that was deposited by Yitzak Rabin."<sup>13</sup> This approach was based on more than seventeen personal phone calls Clinton had with Assad and Barak during August, as he vacationed in Martha's Vineyard. At meetings later that month at the UN in New York and at the White House, the United States first pressed five points that Israel wanted Syria to agree to before giving recognition of the Rabin deposit. The points included security arrangements, normalization of relations, water arrangements, terms for Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, and a timetable for implementation. Such a move, without a political guarantee by Barak that Israel would fulfill the Rabin deposit, was viewed by Syria as an unhelpful diversion. To avoid stalemate and pursue the Rabin deposit during Clinton's fading time in office, back-channel talks began and secret messages were passed from Shaara to Barak through the Jordanian, Omani, and French foreign ministries.

In order to streamline channels, Barak solicited the sole involvement of the United States, stating his fear that other

countries might end up “burying the process instead of advancing it.”<sup>14</sup> At the request of Israel, Dennis Ross set up three days of secret preliminary talks on August 26 between Uri Sagi, Barak’s envoy to the Syrian talks, and Riad Daoudi, the legal adviser to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>15</sup> At the official residence of the U.S. ambassador to Switzerland in Berne, Sagi and Daoudi focused on finding out the extent to which Barak recognized the Rabin deposit. In the presence of Ross, Daoudi gave assurances to Sagi of Syria’s seriousness about making peace with Israel. Despite this, Sagi revealed that he was not authorized to give confirmation of the Rabin deposit’s existence, ambiguously remarking that “if the deposit did exist, Barak would not withdraw it.”<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the talks left Sagi with a feeling of optimism, and he immediately reported to Barak that “we have partners for peace. An accord is in sight.”<sup>17</sup>

Ross coordinated additional meetings for Sagi and Daoudi in Washington on September 15, adding Yoel Zinger, who as a legal adviser to the Israeli military had contributed to Israeli-Egyptian peace and the Oslo Accords, and General Ibrahim Omar, who was Asad’s head of military intelligence. Again, in the presence of Ross, who was accompanied by Martin Indyk, Robert Malley, and Aaron Miller, Daoudi emphasized Syria’s commitment to reaching peace with Israel. Syria proved forthcoming again, agreeing to tackle all the other issues important to Israel, including normalization of relations, water, and security.

But to the Syrians’ frustration, the Israelis were noncommittal about accepting the standard interpretation of the location of the June 4, 1967, line. In the Syrian view, it is a line that was precisely drafted by UN truce officials and clearly demarcated. Still, the Israelis gave a different interpretation, and Sagi, who was still unauthorized to discuss the Rabin deposit, was only able to weakly signal to Daoudi that “we are going to give you something, and it won’t be the 1923 international boundary.”<sup>18</sup> Without confirmation of the

deposit, Daoudi felt the meeting ended poorly and without reaching a common understanding. But Sagi, after hearing reiterations of Syria's commitment to peace, felt even stronger that "peace with Syria is within arm's reach."<sup>19</sup>

Dissension arose within the Israeli team over how to proceed. Some, like Ami Ayalon and Gilead Sher, advised Barak not to become too involved in the Syrian track to the detriment of the Palestinian one. Looking back at Barak's choice, Sher lamented:

I thought it was a mistake at the time. I told Barak that this is deviating from the real core problem of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which is the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and that whether he would be successful or not on the Syrian track, the Palestinians would forever look at it as a humiliating, neglecting attitude, and it will make hard bargaining much more efficient from their side toward their constituencies and vis-à-vis the Israelis negotiators once the negotiations are resumed at the right pace.

True, there was an official track of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians all along the way, but it wasn't anything that was aimed at concluding an agreement on core issues—not until mid-April 2000 and immediately after the failure in Geneva [March 27, 2000].<sup>20</sup>

There were members of the U.S. negotiating team like Gemal Helal, policy adviser and Arabic translator for the president, who felt that negotiation with Syria first was "a big waste of time." Helal reflects that, within the State Department, "Indyk was almost the only one who wanted to follow this. To a certain extent, Ross went along with it."<sup>21</sup> Ross defended Barak's strategy at the time, stating "[Barak] has also said, much as we have said, that whatever is done on the Israeli-Syrian track does not come at the expense of the Israeli-Palestinian track."<sup>22</sup> Aaron Miller, Ross's deputy, felt

that the Syria-first approach was a distraction from the more pressing issue of Palestine,<sup>23</sup> but Secretary Albright had previously warned Miller and Ross not to present either her or the president with differing views. As a result, Ross's seniority often trumped other dissenting policy recommendations,<sup>24</sup> though the decision ultimately rested with Clinton and Barak, who were, in the views of Miller and Helal, too optimistic that both tracks could be done.

The United States and Israel proceeded with Syria. As Shaara spent most of October and November recovering from open-heart surgery, communications moved the next channel up in a series of direct and sometimes lengthy phone calls between Clinton,<sup>25</sup> Sandy Berger, and Asad.<sup>26</sup> In an attempt to restart talks in November, Clinton sent Asad a letter of interrogatories, focused on the question, "If Israel meets your territorial demands, what will Syria be able to do for Israel in the area of security arrangements, diplomatic normalization, water, security along the Lebanese border, and a timetable for phasing in the aspects of the package?"<sup>27</sup> When Albright visited Asad in December to retrieve the answer, a breakthrough was made: Asad was willing to "respond favorably to the letter and start talks where they had left off" before Netanyahu's election in 1996.<sup>28</sup>

To "start talks where they had left off" was a form of constructive ambiguity, a diplomatic tactic of leaving contentious points vague in order to bring parties closer. It enabled each side to proceed based on its own interpretations of precisely where negotiations "left off." Unfortunately, Barak thought they fell short of the confidence-building measures he had sought from Syria in September with his five political demands conveyed by Clinton. To meet Barak halfway, Asad agreed to Albright's request that a high-level delegation be sent without delay, at the foreign ministerial level, to meet with Clinton and Barak in Washington.

Contrary to Syria's historical practice of not holding senior-level political negotiations without "payment"—in this case,



without a firm Israeli commitment to the Rabin deposit—Asad gave in. This was, to be sure, viewed both in the United States and Syria as a major concession.<sup>29</sup> American negotiators, particularly Ross, were enthused by the move, which to them signaled a dramatic willingness on Asad's part to conclude an agreement.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps, they believed, a Syrian deal could be reached after all.

To construe the gesture as a political victory, Barak commented to his own party members:

Four years ago as foreign minister, I saw and sat one person away from Farouk al-Shaara at lunch given by the king of Spain, but we couldn't speak with him. It was impossible to conduct a dialogue, and today we are able to conduct a dialogue.<sup>31</sup>

Political analysts in Israel, however, saw things differently. Even before his scheduled visit with Shaara, Barak was chided for agreeing to meet with Shaara, who was "only" a foreign minister. Israeli pundits predicted that "every word Barak speaks will be recorded in the Syrian mind as a promise. Every word that Shaara speaks will await Asad's final ruling."<sup>32</sup> And despite Barak's efforts to portray the peace efforts with Syria positively, in the absence of prior public preparation for peace, particularly among the Jewish settlers in the Golan—whose permanence was suggested and even encouraged by Barak's recent actions—Israeli domestic opposition came out strongly against concessions.

As Barak prepared to leave for Washington, he discovered that fully relinquishing the Golan Heights would, in fact, be more politically costly than he first believed. The chairman of the Likud Party, Ariel Sharon, called Barak's willingness to end the occupation of the Golan a "total surrender," and lambasted the Clinton administration, opining that, when it came to territorial compromise, the "American internal interests don't have a thing to do with vital Israeli interests."<sup>33</sup> For Barak, Sharon's assertions were particularly biting, as

Sharon had once considered Barak one of his favorite generals while Sharon served defense minister in the early 1980s.<sup>34</sup> When rumors circulated that Barak was willing to make good on the Rabin deposit, Sharon blasted him, claiming that the concessions were “dangerous” and “a big victory for Syria.”

Barak was also unable to gain sympathy from influential elements within his own coalition government. His Interior Minister, Natan Sharansky, took part in a series of pro-settler rallies, including a massive demonstration in front of the Knesset, and threatened to withdraw from Barak’s government should territorial concessions with Syria be made. Sharansky’s Yisrael Ba’Aliyah Party represented recent Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, many of whom had settled in the Golan. Sharansky harnessed their energy against peace by attacking Asad, whom he disparaged as “the darkest of any dictator,” worse than any of the Soviet leaders during his years of captivity in the Siberian gulag.<sup>35</sup> Sharansky’s rhetoric in explaining why he opposed peace with Syria remains the same today:

The depth of our withdrawal from Syria will be at the depth of democracy there. I always say “I am ready to give them all the rights, *except the right to destroy me!*” And as long as they will not be able to destroy me, Syria must rebuild democracy!<sup>36</sup>

Joining Sharansky in protest was Yitzhak Levy, Barak’s minister of housing and chairman of the National Religious Party, which represents the overall settler movement. Levy likewise threatened to quit Barak’s government, and stated to his supporters that “we cannot be partners, under any circumstances, to the uprooting of communities, or any withdrawal from the Golan.”<sup>37</sup> Most imperiling to Barak’s government was the anticipated opposition of Shas, the Orthodox Sephardic Party, which would, on the spiritual advice of its rabbi, likely use its powerful block-voting in opposition to

peace with Syria, should such an agreement ever reach the stage of referendum.<sup>38</sup>

With right-wing settler groups able to dominate the Israeli discourse over returning the Golan, concern grew in several Israeli cities over the appearance of political graffiti that called for Barak's assassination.<sup>39</sup> Barak's Deputy Minister of Defense, Ephraim Sneh, publicly stated his "fear [of] violent activity by extremist elements," and others noted the similarity with conditions that preceded Rabin's 1995 assassination.<sup>40</sup>

But just as things seemed out of his political control, a surprise gesture was made: Barak's fractious cabinet closed ranks and symbolically stood behind him. They provided him with an upbeat send-off before he boarded the plane to Washington.<sup>41</sup> Hours after this show of solidarity, Barak arrived at Andrews Air Force Base on December 15. The Israeli delegation was confident that despite all the domestic hoopla, Barak was prepared to negotiate.<sup>42</sup>

The Clinton administration, too, was hopeful that Barak was ready to get serious. But Barak got cold feet at the last minute: Martin Indyk, who was summoned onto Barak's jet from the tarmac at Andrews, was the first to learn of the depth of Barak's political fears.<sup>43</sup> Not even Sagi, Barak's lead negotiator with Syria, was aware of his hesitation.<sup>44</sup> While still on the plane, Barak revealed to Indyk, the leading U.S. advocate of the Syrian negotiations, his change of heart. "I can't do it," he confessed. "My people won't understand. It's all too quick. I have to prepare my public for a full withdrawal from the Golan, and I have to take time."<sup>45</sup>

Barak's sudden backpedaling portended disaster. But for the U.S. team hosting the talks, the show had to go on. With shakiness, on December 16, just days before Christmas, the highest-level talks ever between Israel and Syria commenced with a televised media appearance in the White House Rose Garden. After crediting the meeting as a "new chapter in history," President Clinton invited his guests, Barak and Shaara,

to address the press pool. Barak's opening comments were laconic but conciliatory, as he called for both negotiators to "put an end to the horrors of war."

Next to deliver, Shaara unfolded a prepared speech much longer than anyone had anticipated. He chided the media for providing empathetic coverage of the 17,000 Golan settlers who faced resettlement in the wake of an agreement, and spoke about the marginalized portrayal of the more than 400,000 Syrians who were forced to flee their homes after Israel's occupation began. His remarks, which for his U.S. hosts never seemed to end, gave a vituperative history lesson that, among other things, blamed Israel for provoking the 1967 war. Shaara harshly criticized Israel's occupation, stating, "For Syria, peace means the return of all its occupied land, while for Israel peace will mean the end of the Israelis' sense of fear; fear that is a result of the occupation."

Clinton and Barak were offended by Shaara's commentary, which they found crass, discordant, and less than conciliatory. But for Barak, Shaara's speech also offered welcome cover. Once the parties adjourned across the street to Blair House, where the talks were to take place, Barak raised Shaara's speech with Clinton as a reason to not show flexibility on territory, the Syrians' utmost concern. Barak feared that an already shaky Israeli public opinion would sense weakness should he reward the Syrians by returning their land.<sup>46</sup> With such a negative beginning, Clinton devoted his personal involvement to improving rapport. It worked, and as the hours passed, the atmosphere became positive and both parties spoke to their U.S. hosts very movingly about peace.<sup>47</sup>

The Israeli delegation, in addition to Barak and Sagi, also included military and intelligence professionals. They had fruitful and beneficial dialogue with their Syrian counterparts, giving particular emphasis to the areas of security. There were no media leaks, and some inroads were made.<sup>48</sup> Inside and away from the cameras, the U.S. negotiating team was able to guide the parties into an organized and struc-

tured agenda that narrowly defined the remaining problems under four specific realms: borders, water, normalization of relations, and security.<sup>49</sup>

After just two days of discussions, the parties broke with a surge of optimism and an announcement to meet again in two weeks at an undisclosed location in the United States. Barak, it turns out, was finally willing to give both the Syrians and Americans a commitment to the Rabin deposit.<sup>50</sup> As Albright had earlier promised Asad, Barak pledged to deliver the Israeli offer to withdraw to the June 4, 1967, line at the next round, in January 2000, when four committees, including a committee on borders, would convene and finally hammer out the details of implementation.<sup>51</sup>

Asad was elated and began to prepare his public to elicit popular support. Since he had been one of Israel's staunchest critics over the years, Asad knew that for there ever to be a handshake over a lasting peace agreement based on "full peace for full withdrawal," his public must be readied psychologically. While talks were under way at Blair House, Asad instructed government workers in Damascus to hang political banners calling for peace with Israel. Covered by an astonished Israeli press, and an even more surprised Syrian public, some of Asad's posters read: "We fought honorably. We negotiated honorably. We will make peace honorably." It was not only a reference to the dignified manner in which Asad was seeking peace with Israel, but also to the prideful way in which Asad viewed Syria's coming to terms with the existence of a Jewish state.<sup>52</sup>

Members of the U.S. and Israeli negotiating team interpreted the concessions Asad was willing to make—the sending of his foreign minister, the willingness to initially begin negotiations without a firm commitment to the Rabin deposit, and the various manifestations of peace—as an impressive confirmation that Asad was pining for a deal. The United States and Israel both sensed Syrian urgency based on four factors: that Asad appeared to be nearing the end of his life; the

pressure of time constraints given the approaching end of President Clinton's tenure; the U.S. distraction of interests given the Palestinian track; and Barak's public commitment to withdraw from Lebanon the following summer. Unfortunately, all of this gave Barak, who liked to rely on his innate strategic judgment, a sense that he could exert even more bargaining leverage over Asad. Thus Barak began to theorize that Asad might perhaps relent on his firm territorial demands under the right conditions.<sup>53</sup>

Upon returning home from the Blair House talks, Barak found his domestic political problems growing, with right-wing constituents haggling over the smallest of diplomatic minutiae: At Blair House, Shaara had reiterated the Syrian preference to hold off from a public handshake until the final conclusion of a deal. When asked at the time, however, Barak gave the Israeli media the impression that a handshake did in fact take place inside, behind closed doors. The nonexistent handshake was covered for three days, until finally, upon returning home, Barak reversed his story on television.<sup>54</sup> The right-wing Likud faction hyped the absence of a handshake as a sign of disrespect and Syria's unwillingness to come to terms with Israel's existence. But Barak's handling of this episode was the least of his problems.

Rumblings within Barak's own government flared up again, particularly among the ultra-Orthodox Shas, which began threatening destabilization of his government by withdrawing from the coalition—a move that would leave him with a minority of just fifty-one out of 120 members. Advisers had warned Barak about inviting the ultra-Orthodox group into his "big-tent" coalition. As predicted, since joining, Shas had used blackmail tactics by conditioning its support on national items important to Barak with Barak's funding of its religious school system.<sup>55</sup>

Barak found the opposition formidable, and began to seek help from outside sources. To improve his unenviable situation, he turned to members of the same American team

he employed during his campaign. The Labor Party again procured assistance through Clinton's public relations guru, James Carville, who had helped elect Barak and was father of the winning slogan used in Clinton's 1992 campaign, "It's the economy, stupid." In order to keep in touch with what the public was thinking, Barak, as if to emulate the political savvy of Clinton, began relying on and placing personal emphasis on the use of polls.

Barak's consultants also launched a PR offensive. Carville promoted Syrian-Israeli peace by floating new slogans like, "It's good for the economy, stupid," "It will bring the boys home" (referring to Israelis serving in southern Lebanon), and "It will isolate your real enemies" (i.e., Iran and Iraq).<sup>56</sup> Some of the efforts, which were viewed as imported White House propaganda, appeared to be taken too far. Members of the Knesset felt cheapened when provided with surveys claiming that an \$18 billion U.S. cash transfer to Israel would lead to a 10 percent increase in Barak's chances of winning a majority vote in a land-for-peace referendum with Syria.<sup>57</sup>

Politically active members of right-wing American Jewish organizations also spoke out. They let it be known to Likud Party members that the Israeli Embassy in Washington had asked them to lobby their congressional representatives in support of financial subsidization of Israeli-Syrian peace.<sup>58</sup> The less-than-discreet efforts again drew the attention of Sharon and fellow Likudnik Silvan Shalom, who charged both Clinton and Barak with "buying" the hearts of Israelis as part of Clinton's ambition to win a Nobel Peace Prize before his term ended.<sup>59</sup> Seeking to harness U.S. opposition, Sharon went so far as to pen an op-ed in the *New York Times* attempting to convince Americans "why Israel must not give up the Golan."<sup>60</sup>

The results of Barak's last-minute PR efforts were mixed. Polls showing right-wing opposition to a Golan deal caused him to overcompensate. He dismissed positive reports showing that a Syrian peace agreement would be backed by senior

members of the military establishment. Tel Aviv University's Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, in its annual report authored by retired Israeli military officers, advocated what should have been a heartening conclusion: that the timing was right for Israel's full withdrawal from the Golan. The study, among other things, cited the overwhelming strength of the Israeli military and its ability to defend the pre-1967 borders as a reason to abdicate the burdens of the Golan occupation.<sup>61</sup>

As the millennium approached, Barak realized that he had to make a decision. Decisiveness had never been a problem for him as a military commander, but now, in a much different political world, he found himself cornered between competing ideologies. All the past efforts he had made to paint himself as one of Israel's most respected leaders were now coming to bear. Because the Syrians were meeting him halfway, a major decision lay just ahead. He knew that performance would be expected by the United States and others. Both Clinton and Barak realized that the next round would determine the legacies of both leaders. And for Barak, his commitment to full withdrawal would be a litmus test for how negotiations on other fronts could be expected to succeed.



## *Showdown at Shepherdstown*

**O**N THE EVE of Barak's departure to Washington for the next set of negotiations with Syria, Uri Sagi spent an entire night reminding him of the strategic importance of concluding a Syrian peace deal. Sagi, himself a retired general who had fought on the Golan Heights during the 1967 war and had even commanded the prestigious Golani Brigade, assured Barak that he knew better than anyone what the stakes were.<sup>1</sup> But as they prepared to fly back to Washington, where Barak would be expected to table the Rabin deposit,<sup>2</sup> Barak expressed doubt to mask an underlying political stage fright. Despite all of Sagi's legwork, Barak was caving to the political pressure of the right wing. He told Sagi about another new poll, which showed that only 13 percent of Israeli respondents agreed to a total withdrawal.<sup>3</sup>

Sagi advised Barak not to attend the next round of talks after sensing that more groundwork needed to be prepared at the foreign ministerial rank. He proposed that Barak send David Levy, his foreign minister, to handle the discussions. But Barak, wishing to turn the Syrian negotiations into a

series of events, decided that he should be the one to go. Reflecting later on his obstinacy, Sagi hypothesized that “Barak became afraid that David Levy might steal the political show.”<sup>4</sup>

Barak brought with him a phalanx of military and security advisers, hoping that the Israeli public would feel that its security interests were in safe hands.<sup>5</sup> Accompanying Barak was Sagi, once a former head of Israeli military intelligence; Zvi Stauber, a former Israeli intelligence officer who had worked on negotiations with Jordanians, Palestinians and Syrians; and Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, the Israel Defense Forces chief of staff after Barak, who was also heavily involved in mid-1990s talks with both Syrians and Palestinians. David Levy, a Likud member, joined the group but played little role, as he speaks very poor English. In addition, Barak brought Elyakim Rubinstein, the attorney general.

Barak’s spokesman, Gadi Baltiansky, was also present with media headlines, prepared for either outcome.<sup>6</sup> This was because members of the Israeli delegation truly did not know what to expect, in part because Barak had not made his own decision. The Israeli delegation was out of the loop because Barak had withheld the details of Sagi’s back-channel negotiations with Syria, due to his own concerns about leaks to the media. Thus not every member of the delegation was able to weigh in confidently or with equal knowledge.

In contrast, the Syrian delegation was well-constructed and prepared. As the Israelis had done, the Syrians brought with them a number of military advisers, some of whom were former adversaries of Israel on the Golan battlefields in the 1967 and 1973 wars. Accompanying Shaara was Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Abu Saleh. Also present were Youssef Shakkour, the retired head of the Syrian army; Riad Daoudi and General Ibrahim Omar, both whom had interacted in prior back channels with Sagi; Walid Moallem, the former ambassador to the United States who had negotiated with Israel for many years in that capacity; Mikhael Wahbah, the

Syrian representative to the UN; Majed Daoud, a former director of the international water department; Bouthaina Shabban, a trusted aide and translator for President Asad; and Suleiman Serra, from the Syrian embassy in Geneva. The composition of the Syrian team was a balance between expertise and experience, as many had continuously negotiated with five Israeli governments since the 1991 Madrid conference.<sup>7</sup>

The parties arrived in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, on January 3, 2000, to begin their discussions. The State Department team, headed by Secretary Albright, Dennis Ross, Martin Indyk, Gemal Helal, Jonathan Schwartz, the deputy legal adviser to the Secretary of State, and Wendy Sherman, a principal officer and appointed adviser to Albright, would orchestrate the talks from a nearby conference center that had been rented out for their exclusive use. From the NSC, Sandy Berger, Bruce Riedel, and Rob Malley also partook. For secrecy reasons, Barak demanded that his U.S. hosts arrange the summit in the form of a vacuum; he insisted that cell phones be collected to curb media leaks. At the commencement of the talks, State Department spokesman Jamie Rubin met Barak's request to take things slow, and set public expectations exceedingly low. He remarked:

I think it's fair to say that Charles Dickens's novel *Great Expectations* is not the novel that is being read by the negotiators and the working level officials. We do not expect to be able to achieve a core agreement in one round of negotiations.<sup>8</sup>

Indyk and Ross, now aware of Barak's political misgivings, sought to keep this from the Syrians, in hopes that Barak's cold feet would thaw. Blatant hints were dropped by Barak; had the Syrians been listening carefully, they would have seen his digression from the Blair House commitment to deliver on the Rabin deposit. In his departure speech on

January 3, Barak revealed that “nobody knows what the border line will be.”<sup>9</sup> Barak convinced Sagi to try to make use of his perceived negotiating advantage, and arrived at Shepherdstown with a request for Clinton to postpone the convening of the committee on borders for the first two days, hoping that Syria, eager for a deal, might concede additional security assurances.<sup>10</sup>

Once discovered, Barak’s opening tactic deeply damaged trust and hurt the feeling of good will among the Syrians, who had traveled to Shepherdstown after weeks of fasting and exhaustive preparation during the holy month of Ramadan. They had arrived quite prepared to sign a peace agreement ending all hostilities, and were hoping that peace would come amid their celebration of Eid Ramadan. After receiving assurances from Secretary Albright in December—and even from Barak himself at Blair House—that the Rabin deposit would be tabled, they were outraged to learn of his retrenchment only after arriving.<sup>11</sup>

President Clinton, the only person believed by the U.S. and Syrian teams to have sway with Barak, was called upon to intervene. Over the course of the next few days, Clinton shuttled the sixty-five-mile trek between Washington and Shepherdstown, holding over six private meetings in order to get Barak to authorize his delegation to assemble the borders committee.<sup>12</sup> His own frustration evident, Clinton resorted to “taking Barak to the woodshed,” as Indyk described it, but was unable to loosen Barak’s tight grip on the Rabin deposit.<sup>13</sup> Desperate, Clinton unavailingly spoke in private with Likud opponent Ariel Sharon, in an attempt to soothe Barak’s political fears and win over the secret endorsement of his archrival.<sup>14</sup>

While Clinton attempted to cure Barak’s indecisiveness, Shaara agreed, albeit grudgingly, to Clinton’s request that Syria allow participation in the three other committees, on water, normalization of relations, and security. As happened at Blair, significant concessions were extracted by the Israelis,

even though they had not shown the Syrians the prize for their efforts. Asad had authorized Shaara to accommodate Israel on all of its security concerns in exchange for withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, line. Shaara daringly exceeded this mandate—without the Rabin deposit—hoping that the U.S. and Israeli teams would catch on to their seriousness, and convince Barak to convene the committee on borders.

Meanwhile, on behalf of the Syrian government, Shaara agreed to reduce the size of the Syrian military along the border (as Egypt had done in the 1978 Camp David agreement), placing American and French—even Israeli—military observers within Syrian territory, and the placement of electronic sensors all along the Golan, including radar sensors that would hang from balloons.<sup>15</sup> The Syrians also welcomed additional monitoring mechanisms, such as U.S. satellite imagery that would detect if either side was preparing hostile military action against the other.

With regard to normalization of relations (or “peaceful relations,” as the Syrians prefer to call it), Syria abided by its stated premise of “full peace for full withdrawal,” and agreed to extend full diplomatic relations, complete with functioning embassies, an exchange of ambassadors, an end to the economic boycott, and the establishment of commercial relations. Water, the Syrians posited, was a much simpler solution. If the Syrians had wished to contaminate, pollute, or construct an upstream dam that would alter water flowing downward to Lake Tiberias (also known as the Sea of Galilee), they could have done so at any time prior. Syria agreed that Israel could keep its use of the lake, which the Israelis use for nearly 40 percent of its total water freshwater resources,<sup>16</sup> and the Syrians reacted positively to the idea that the United States would fund desalinization plants to provide both sides an alternative supply.

Even with the progress being made by Syria, neither Clinton nor Albright—furious at this point—could get Barak to budge on delivering the Rabin deposit. Barak pleaded with

Clinton not too push things too fast toward an agreement, asking the consummate American politician to understand his domestic political concerns and his preference that prolonged negotiations take place so that the Israeli public would perceive its leader as “putting up a tough fight.”<sup>17</sup> Ross, who was sympathetic to Barak’s pronouncements on making concessions on both the Palestinian and Syrian tracks, saw how things were deteriorating and was guided by his belief that the United States shouldn’t be “too tough” with Barak. Looking back on the errors in hindsight, Ross has delicately conceded that this was a mistake, but then turned defensive:

We let [Barak] dictate too much of what was going to be possible and what we would do. We could have taken a tougher posture towards him in terms of just making it clear we wouldn’t do certain things.

The problem is that, here was a guy [Barak] who was prepared to make very far-reaching concessions. And it was, after all, *his concessions!* They weren’t our concessions! So it’s easy to say “we should have been tougher”; on the other hand, if you were too tough, then nothing might be possible and we would never even be able to explore what might be possible.<sup>18</sup>

To help clarify positions and move the parties forward, Ross and Indyk, with input from others, prepared a “draft peace treaty” in the form of a “non-paper,”<sup>19</sup> to be presented to both parties by the president. The draft treaty detailed very far-reaching Syrian concessions but was designed by the United States so that it was, as Indyk later put it, “basically silent to send pabulum on the question of Israeli withdrawal.”<sup>20</sup> Barak, not yet wishing to acknowledge, as Rabin had, Israel’s willingness to withdraw to the June 4 line, instead persuaded the U.S. team to try to advance an alternative withdrawal based on a map created by British and French colonial rulers during the days of Mandatory Palestine,

called the 1923 International Boundary. If used, Israel would stand to gain proprietary rights over Lake Tiberias and thus over the scarce water resources it has controlled since 1967. And should they wish, Israel would then be in a position to deny Syrians the opportunity to “dip their toes in the lake,” as the 1923 International Boundary buffers the shoreline with a ten-meter-wide strip of land.

For Syrians, this notion is regarded as wishful thinking, primarily because the language of UN Resolution 242 calls for “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict,” meaning withdrawal to the positions that were held on the eve of the Six-Day War. Their evidence in this regard is compelling and historically accepted by both sides—even the Israelis do not dispute that, before the outbreak of the 1967 war, the Syrians inhabited and controlled the northeastern beaches of the lake.

The Syrians viewed Barak’s attempt to control the ten-meter strip as both a lack of seriousness and a form of Israeli avarice. For generations, the Syrians had used the windswept beaches along the lake as a recreational area for swimming and vacation; the idea that Israel would actually control the last ten meters of beach leading to the water was a torment that Hafez al-Assad would never accept. In his estimation, to relinquish what is guaranteed to Syria under international law and revert to a map created by illegitimate colonial rulers would not be consistent with his pledge of making a peace that Syria’s future generations could defend.<sup>21</sup>

Barak’s request to use the 1923 International Boundary would also require the United States to part ways with its own historical interpretation of Resolution 242, dating back to the months of tense debate leading up to its passage in November 1967. Part of the reason that 242 passed without the United States exercising its Security Council veto was that it kept the Israeli withdrawal clause vague, simply requiring “withdrawal . . . from territories.” Since the definite article “the” preceding “territories” was absent, the

Israelis could use the vagueness to avoid fully withdrawing from all of the Arab land they occupied. The U.S. ambassador to the UN at the time, Arthur Goldberg, believed that vagueness when crafting the withdrawal clause was necessary, as it would promulgate a “land-for-peace” formula that would impel the Arab governments to recognize and negotiate with Israel. At that time, bilateral assurances were given by Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban that “Israel was not seeking territorial aggrandizement and had no ‘colonial’ aspirations.”<sup>22</sup> Based on this premise, the United States agreed to advance the nonspecific language, placing Israel in a position of hegemony.

The British government, recovering in 1967 from its own Middle East colonial wounds, fought the proposed ambiguity. It recognized that the language could make Israel the de facto assignee of property rights on the land it occupied. Doubting Israel’s claim that it did not have territorial ambition, Britain threatened to strike down the U.S.-sponsored language with its own Security Council veto. The United States and Britain overcame the impasse by agreeing to a clarification via a secret memorandum.

The existence of this classified agreement was kept hidden from public knowledge until the early 1990s, when the full text of it was leaked to and distributed by American historian Donald Neff. Unlike the language of 242, the premise of the U.S.-UK agreement was very unambiguous: The two countries agreed that 242 on the Egyptian and Syrian fronts would mean *full* withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, line in exchange for full peace.<sup>23</sup> History had shown that the United States was true to its agreement, as Camp David 1978 succeeded as a result of President Carter’s principled stand beside the U.S.-UK interpretation. For their offer of full peace, Egypt received full Israeli withdrawal.

To abridge the call for withdrawal to the June 4 line was controversial, to say the least. Over the course of a few days, the nervous U.S. delegation tried to break the diplomatic log-



jam by winning Syrian flexibility on the principle Damascus valued most—withdrawal to the June 4 line. Despite the consensus of the intelligence community and professional Syria desk officers at the State Department who believed such a move would fail, the U.S. drafters decided to float a trial balloon on the border issue to buy Barak some time.

The drafters rationalized this course of action by trying to resuscitate a remark that was previously made by Shaara at Blair House. According to Albright:

I can't tell you how much time we spent trying to figure out this whole issue of the "June 4 line." And one of the big deals at Blair House was that Shaara said, "there is no book in any library that actually says where the June 4 line is."<sup>24</sup>

In the Syrian view, the statement was made as Shaara was harmlessly attempting to overcome Barak's obstinacy during a discussion on the June 4, 1967, withdrawal. Whatever new interpretation the Americans might have construed, Shaara was fully confident that the Americans knew that he was well on record, as was Asad, by stating over and over again that the June 4 line "certainly" means that Syrian sovereignty must be restored all the way to the waterline of Lake Tiberias.<sup>25</sup> Fatigued by the reality that Barak would simply not give in, Albright, Ross, and the drafters of the "draft peace treaty" flirted with a new position that could possibly give room for Barak's maneuver to retain a small portion of land sealing off the shores of Lake Tiberias from Syria.

On the morning of Friday, January 7, while seated around a cozy fireplace, President Clinton, accompanied by Albright and Berger, distributed confidential copies of the proposed U.S. draft to both Shaara and Barak. For Shaara, America's unwillingness to commit to full withdrawal was wholly unacceptable. Barak, who the Americans knew was trying to "slow-walk" the process, quickly requested that a few days be taken to study the paper, give individual feedback, then adjourn

before coming back for a second round.<sup>26</sup> As the Israelis began observing the Sabbath that evening, and as Syria would be celebrating Eid Ramadan the following day, Clinton agreed with Barak and suggested to the Syrians that the parties return on Sunday prepared to give their comments.

In the interim, Albright convinced Barak and Shaara to step away from the caldron of decisions and spend some downtime touring her nearby farm and the local U.S. Civil War battlegrounds of Antietam and Harper's Ferry. Barak was enthusiastic about taking a break, and was attentive while receiving battlefield history lessons from the NSC's Bruce Riedel, who is an avid Civil War buff. Hoping that some breathing room would help the process along, Shaara accepted Albright's suggestion and adjourned to her rustic retreat.

At the close of the weekend a storm of controversy erupted when the London-based Arabic newspaper *Al-Hayat* published a leaked summary of the U.S. draft. The eyes of Arab readers went straight to the published U.S. understanding that Syria "does not object to taking into consideration the topographical nature of the terrain on each side of the border" and that "Syria recognizes that the line of June 4 is not a border and has not been marked out, and it therefore agrees to participate in the determination of this line." If Syria had accepted such a measure, it would have been a monumental concession and departure from the Arab negotiating standard of Resolution 242, as it would later open an advantageous door for Barak to edge away from the June 4 line and argue for border modifications under Israel's much-preferred 1923 International Boundary.

For Israelis, in particular those who found withdrawal from the Golan unacceptable, the leak forced them to confront the reality that Barak was really considering returning almost all of the Golan. But Barak's spokesman, Gadi Baltiansky, played down the suggestions of withdrawal and began to publicly pro

mote Barak's unwillingness to convene the borders committee. He dismissed the many Syrian concessions that were made and reacted to the leak by assuring the Israeli press that "Israel would not present any concrete position on the border until it receives clarifications on security and normalization issues."<sup>27</sup> Foreign Minister David Levy also called the leaked text "theoretical," and assured the public that "on the issues of borders, nothing has been agreed."<sup>28</sup> Unnamed Israeli delegation members began to spin falsehoods before international television outlet CNN, and unattributed Israeli quotes soon appeared accusing Syria of intransigence, stating, "The Syrians, so far, have not delivered the goods."<sup>29</sup>

Later that evening, President Clinton met again with Shaara and Barak, this time over a farewell dinner of beef tenderloin and wine. The conversation was perfunctory. Barak, still unwilling to table the deposit, announced that he was obliged to return home to Israel for a few days. Shaara—at the peak of frustration, bitterness, and concern for his own political neck—also decided to return home and deliver Asad the bad news. As the last meeting adjourned, Clinton signaled to Shaara that he wasn't alone in his frustration. In the presence of Riad Daoudi, Clinton bluntly commented to Shaara that "if I knew that Barak was going to behave like this I would have never asked President Asad to send his foreign minister!"<sup>30</sup> In his memoirs, Clinton wrote, "to put it mildly, I was disappointed."<sup>31</sup> A very senior U.S. State Department official corroborated that Clinton wasn't the only one mad at Barak:

[Madeleine Albright] was furious with Barak at Shepherdstown because he had specifically told us that he would put down the Rabin stuff when they were all together. He never did it because he was concerned about the polls. It was a missed opportunity.<sup>32</sup>

In *My Life*, Clinton makes it clear that Barak was less forthcoming than the Syrians:

The Syrians came to Shepherdstown in a positive and flexible frame of mind, eager to make an agreement. By contrast, Barak, who had pushed hard for the tables, decided, apparently based on polling data, that he needed to slow-walk the process for a few days in order to convince the Israeli public that he was a tough negotiator. He wanted me to use my good relationship with Shaara and Asad to keep the Syrians happy while he said as little as possible during his self-imposed waiting period.<sup>33</sup>

The next day, without even a closing press conference, Barak and Shaara departed, with the only agreement being that they would return and continue on January 19. Both sides returned home to unpleasant scenes: Barak to a demonstration of over 100,000 right-wing Israelis who were against giving up the Golan; Shaara to an angry Hafez al-Assad, who was livid that Shaara had seemingly offered “full peace” without the sine qua non of “full withdrawal.”

Matters took a turn for the worse on January 13, when, to the dismay of both U.S. and Syrian negotiators, the full text of the U.S. draft treaty was published in *Ha'aretz*, a prominent Israeli newspaper. Apart from listing nearly all the Syrian concessions that were made, the seven-page document showed, among other things, the “pabulum” that was drafted: that Israel recognizes neither “withdrawal” nor “the June 4, 1967, line.” The Israeli position contained in the document was that there might be “relocation” and that such relocation would only apply to military personnel, thus giving the impression that civilians, i.e., the 17,000 Golan settlers, might in fact have a chance to stay put, though as subjects of Syrian rule. Newspapers everywhere pointed to Barak’s political consultants as the probable source of the leaks, as it appeared to be an attempt by Barak to convince his right-wing constituents that he was not “selling out” their interests, and that he had, in fact, fought the good fight.<sup>34</sup>

Asad was deeply embarrassed by the leaks. Accusations began to circulate within Syria that Asad was giving up on

Syria's vital interests for the selfish sake of handing over power to his son, Bashar.<sup>35</sup> For a country where the government controls the media, Asad, convinced that Barak was not serious about concluding a deal, recalled the delegation in its entirety and severed all contact. In a lengthy phone conversation with Asad right after the leak, Clinton tried to convince him to resume contact with the Israelis and return his delegation.<sup>36</sup> But it was too late. The state-controlled radio in Syria gave the United States and Israel its response:

We are now demanding a concrete review of the negotiations and that requires an undertaking by Israel to demarcate the border of June 4, 1967. An Israeli refusal on this issue will prevent any progress being achieved by any of the other working groups and so a third round of talks would be useless.<sup>37</sup>

When asked in public how he felt about Asad delaying the talks until further Israeli commitment, Barak would show a tough game face, commenting that "if it is not convenient for the Syrians to come now and they need time, then they should take the time. The delay does not bother us."<sup>38</sup>

• SEVEN •

## *Collapse of the Israeli-Syrian Track*

**A**S IT TURNED out, Barak's insouciance after Shepherdstown was all a bluff. He knew that, out of the narrow window of opportunity during Clinton's term, too much time and effort had already been spent on Syria. Barak adamantly wished to fulfill his campaign promise of withdrawing all Israeli troops from Lebanon, but it became clear to him that his public was not properly braced for peace with Syria. Not wishing to suffer the political blowback of being the party to shy away from peace, Barak needed something that would provide him with a graceful exit from the Syrian track.

Disappointed by the ending at Shepherdstown, Clinton, advised by Indyk, Barak, and Sagi that an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement could be reached, tried to convene one final summit. Ross, following the logic of others on the U.S. negotiating team, was increasingly interested in turning back to the Palestinian track. He reflected on the dilemma:

We had missed the moment at Shepherdstown. That was the point. But we couldn't get Barak to get off of the Syrian track and focus on the Palestinians unless we could satisfy him

that we had done everything we could with Asad. And that's the real reason in the end we went back to Geneva [on March 27, 2000].<sup>1</sup>

As the lead negotiator, Ross had to bridge the differences in strategy between an Israeli prime minister—whose country Ross had always given the decisive advantage throughout many years of negotiating—and President Clinton, who genuinely believed a deal was possible but did not wish to do anything to exceed Barak's comfort level, supposedly because he was saving political capital for the Palestinian track. Realizing the latitude afforded him by Ross, Barak saw an opportunity to use his persuasive leverage over both Ross and Clinton, and thus succeeded in crafting a plan with Ross that would satisfy both his and Clinton's short-term political needs but—unfortunately for Syria—not Asad's.

The idea was to offer Asad something that anyone familiar with the details of the Arab-Israeli conflict knew he would outright refuse—something less than what was entitled to Syria based on Resolution 242 and the June 4, 1967, line. Though it would be an offer that would assuredly fail, it could be publicly touted, both among the right-wing hawks in Israel and the United States, as “generous” according to technical percentage points. The plan involved using the 1923 International Boundary—a notion that was rejected outright by Syria at earlier talks—and an additional 190 meters around Lake Tiberias (denying access to the water with a total buffer zone of 200 meters), thus allowing the Israelis to keep a military road to circumnavigate the lake. Also, Israel would seek to keep territory and control in the northern Golan on both banks of the Jordan River, well within the Syrian side of the June 4 line. As a quid pro quo, Israel would agree to drop its claim based on the 1923 International Boundary, which was drafted more than two decades before Israel was a state, to the Syrian village of al-Hamma, by agreeing to return a small sliver of mountainous

land in the southern demilitarized zone. All told, the land swap Barak and Ross envisioned would actually exceed the percentage of territory guaranteed to Syria by Resolution 242, but would be based on *different* territory.

Ross had been forewarned many times by Asad and others that Syria would accept nothing other than what it was entitled to under Resolution 242—nothing more, nothing less. So too had Barak. There was no wavering on this principle. Walid Moallem, who negotiated this issue ad nauseam during his lengthy assignment as the Syrian ambassador to the United States, had this to say:

In 1994, I went with Dennis Ross to Latakia [in Syria] to meet with President Asad at his [vacation] home. Asad said to Dennis, “I can’t give up one inch of my territory. The Syrian people will not accept my agreement which will give them less than one inch of our territory.”

I met Barak in 1995 while he was at the chief-of-staff talks at Blair House, and I told him twenty-eight times within two hours about Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, line.

Barak told me, “Why are you repeating this?” I said, “Because I want you to go to sleep and dream of this line!”<sup>2</sup>

When the United States floated the idea of the 1923 International Boundary at Shepherdstown, Riad Daoudi, Asad’s legal adviser, warned Ross of the danger of this proposal:

Don’t present anything of this kind because you are going to have a real, *real* negative reaction with Asad, and your role as an intermediary in this process might be affected!<sup>3</sup>

Ross, however, was not too concerned with the warnings, given his own reputation among State Department col-



leagues for having a personal disdain for Syria, and, in particular, a loathing for Asad.<sup>4</sup> Clinton, on the other hand, saw things differently and, impressed by his own powers of persuasion, thought the relationship he had built with Asad might be enough to convince the Syrian leader to accept what Ross explained as very minor changes.

As a politician, Clinton probably thought the offer would just have to suffice. The pressure built by the Israel lobby was starting to have an impact on Congress as groups like the hawkist Zionist Organization of America, sounded the alarm that a withdrawal from the Golan would mean “Israel will be left only with a piece of paper and the promises of an unreliable dictator.”<sup>5</sup> The right-wing Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs also chimed in, circulating an advisory letter signed by over twenty retired U.S. military generals—as well as former CIA Director James Woolsey—which read, “The negotiations surrounding the Golan Heights have the potential to undermine regional security efforts that are important to the United States.”<sup>6</sup>

Barak, Clinton, and Ross all knew that Asad would not attend any final meeting lest Clinton himself give strong assurances that the Rabin deposit would finally be tabled. Something had to be done, so Barak engaged in what Israelis call *hasbara*, or, roughly, “propaganda.” Leaks appeared in Israeli newspapers. *Ha’aretz*, on February 28, reported that Barak told his cabinet:

Yitzhak Rabin had given the Americans a commitment, which they passed on to the Syrians, that “If they fulfill Israel’s demands, Israel will be ready to return the entire Golan.” The Syrians “asked several times what the line was, and Rabin, following consultations and discussions, said it was the line of June 4, 1967.”<sup>7</sup>

According to *Ha’aretz*, Barak went on to tell his cabinet that his government was not about to “to erase the past.”

But indirectness was as far as Barak wanted things taken. When an unwitting Secretary Albright suggested that she make a trip to Damascus to outline the plan, Barak quickly rejected the idea. Barak wanted the discussion to be very abstract and discreet, in part because he did not want the secretary and her entourage bringing publicity to something he never intended to honor.<sup>8</sup>

The task to deliver this plan to Asad at a summit was thus left between Ross, the White House, and the NSC, where a two-pronged strategy was developed: direct calls from the president and the use of a highly trusted Arab emissary.

Following Shepherdstown, Clinton made several unsuccessful attempts by phone to convince Asad that Barak was serious about peace, without explicitly mentioning the June 4 line. Bouthaina Shabban recalled with clarity the following:

I was the interpreter—and [Clinton] was saying to him, “I am going to India and I would like you to meet me in Europe,” and President Asad said, “I’m in the middle of formulating a government. I can’t do it now. What am I going to do in Geneva? What are we going to do?”

[Clinton] said to him, “Your requests are met; you will be very happy.” What was the request of President Asad? He announced one thousand times an Israeli withdrawal to the line of June 4, 1967. And [Clinton] said, “The deposit is in my pocket; your requests are met and you will be happy.”<sup>9</sup>

Asad, perhaps mindful after the well-publicized Lewinsky scandal that Clinton had the ability to be coy with words, specifically asked Clinton to clarify that he could count on the U.S., on behalf of Barak, to deliver a withdrawal to the June 4 line. According to Shabban, Clinton responded, “I don’t want to speak over the phone. But trust me: you will be happy.”<sup>10</sup> According to one senior diplomat:

It seemed to me that Asad really had confidence in Clinton. He would not make Clinton uncomfortable by asking and insisting that he give the specific details. Asad just wouldn't put a condition on a meeting with the American president.<sup>11</sup>

While Asad trusted Clinton, some members of his staff were quietly skeptical. But at this stage in world affairs, the word of the president of the United States was good enough for Asad.

What helped convince Asad was that, with Barak's blessing, Clinton enlisted the support of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador to the United States. Bandar, who had successfully delivered innumerable secret messages between the two governments, going back to the early 1980s between Asad and the Reagan administration, had a long-standing trust with Asad.<sup>12</sup> One veteran U.S. intelligence official who participated described Bandar's influence as "tremendous." He said:

There were plenty of qualified [U.S.] Foreign Service officers who could have made this trip. Clinton's selection of Bandar was purposeful. He was a very active mediator during the Oslo years, and [Clinton knew that he] could deliver Asad.<sup>13</sup>

After receiving Oval Office instructions on the weekend of March 18-19, 2000,<sup>14</sup> Bandar and his deputy, Rihab Massoud, listened to Clinton's instructions, which were premised as follows: "If I am able to pressure Barak into conceding the June 4, 1967 line, I'll call you and let you know that you can tell Asad to count on me satisfying his demands at a summit."<sup>15</sup> Knowing what this meant and not wishing to convey false assurances, Bandar pressed Clinton and received his explicit guarantee that such an interpretation would, in fact, mean a withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, line, and that Barak himself was endorsing this channel. Massoud made a contemporaneous note of Clinton's promise,<sup>16</sup> and

neither Bandar nor Massoud asked any further questions: Like Asad, they believed that the word of the president of the United States carried weight.

Just days later, Bandar conveyed the message to Asad in Damascus, who replied with relief that he had spoken with Clinton over fifteen times, and that “Clinton knows what I want. God knows he knows what I want.”<sup>17</sup> Asad was positive, and as a token to Barak, he promised to use the Syrian military forces to quiet Hezbollah on the Lebanese border while he awaited Clinton’s word. Bandar passed the good news back to Berger, who at that time was accompanying the president in India. Shortly thereafter, a message was indirectly returned by a secure phone call from the NSC’s Bruce Riedel, also in India with the president, to Rihab Massoud, who was in Saudi Arabia accompanying Bandar. Massoud recalled:

Bruce Riedel was with them at that time. He called me personally and he said, “We have it [meaning that Clinton succeeded in getting the Rabin deposit from Barak]. Let’s go for the summit!”<sup>18</sup>

Clinton’s summit invitation was quickly offered, though such a moment had been a long time in the making. For years, Syria had remained in a technical state of war with Israel, and it had paid a big price for this. It appeared those days were finally coming to a close. Asad knew that peace with Israel would enable his country to modernize politically, economically, and socially. His strategic decision to seek full peace with Israel in exchange for full withdrawal would bring about a new era for Syria and would open his country to the friendship and support of the United States, leading his people toward a better future. Feeling on the brink of peace, Asad accepted and agreed to meet Clinton in Geneva.

On March 26, 2000, the Syrian delegation arrived at the Intercontinental Hotel in Geneva. They immediately began

to prepare for the next morning's meeting. Word came through the State Department's protocol office that the United States wished to have a significantly larger meeting, with far more attendees. Unsurprisingly, the Syrians agreed and also enlarged its list of participants. There were two meetings scheduled. The first was to conclude and finalize the details of a historic Israeli-Syrian peace agreement. The second was a meeting that Asad had long awaited: improving bilateral U.S.-Syrian relations.

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**The U.S. delegation**—including the staffs of Sandy Berger, Madeleine Albright, and the president—had just skipped across Asia in an exhausting trip. The president's plane, Air Force One, did not touch down in Geneva until roughly 2:30 A.M., and spirits were not high. While on the plane, Berger, who in the final year of Clinton's administration had become Albright's nemesis, suggested to her in passing that Ross was reporting on the peace process directly to him and the president, without informing her. Albright was livid. The White House staff was conscious of the tensions between the two, which would later become more visible, but did everything to keep the president shielded. One senior White House official candidly explained the broader problem:

You would have to ask Dennis who he thought he worked for. I think Dennis thought he worked for the president, and not Madeleine. A lot of time and effort was spent on making sure that Madeleine didn't feel slighted.

She wasn't at the president's right hand—that was Sandy. She wasn't the person the president asked—that was Sandy. To the extent that the president wanted to go deeper, Sandy in many cases was just a facilitator. He was the one who got the right person in front of the president at the right time.

Frankly, the president was more interested in what Rob Malley [NSC staffer] had to say than what Madeleine had to say. He knew more about the Arab-Israeli conflict than Madeleine did. So he didn't really need his secretary of state. There were a lot of conversations that Sandy Berger had about how the White House would position things so as to enhance Madeleine's role.

We were just in a weird spot in the administration. Everybody was beginning to think about, How [is] the world going to view me?<sup>19</sup>

Known for her strong personality and tough demeanor, Albright departed for the hotel and sent aides to awaken Ross, who had arrived just hours earlier. He had been preparing for the meeting and was also operating on very little sleep. Human frailties came into play. The one-sided shouting match that followed did not end until almost 5 A.M., and aides seriously doubted whether Ross or Albright would be able to get any sleep before the next day's important meeting.<sup>20</sup>

The same could not be said of the president. Though tired from his trip, Clinton was energized at the prospect of what he believed could be the conclusion of a deal. He had read intelligence reports that said Asad was in much worse physical shape than anything caused by jet lag,<sup>21</sup> including one report stating that Asad was weak from having recently undergone blood transfusions.

At 10:30 A.M. on March 27, the U.S. team assembled outside the hotel conference room. The staff advances had delicately set up this room, even requiring the president's valet to smuggle clandestinely bulky top-secret maps inside and away from the sea of reporters.<sup>22</sup> Albright, Ross, Berger, and Clinton all appeared and met with Asad and his entire delegation, which had emerged from the hotel elevators on time. Even though intelligence estimates from the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research had forewarned the White House

that a proposal offering anything less than a full withdrawal to the June 4 line was “not what Asad needed,”<sup>23</sup> Clinton and Albright both thought there was room to maneuver. They expected it to be a long day. Indyk, who was in Tel Aviv, remembered the source of their optimism:

I don't believe the 200 meters around the lake would have stopped the deal in other circumstances, because Barak had indicated to us that he was going to be flexible on that and we had all sorts of other ways to deal with that. He indicated to the president in a phone call before the president left for Geneva that he was willing to do more than that.<sup>24</sup>

Ross knew what these further concessions might be, but acting on Barak's instruction, he wanted first to see Asad's reaction. After greeting Asad, standing for photos, and surveying the large assembly, Clinton immediately suggested to Asad that, for intimacy and efficiency, the delegations be narrowly pared down. This was Asad's preference, so he agreed. Clinton next asked that Secretary Albright remain. Asad agreed, and indicated that Shaara would remain also. Both agreed on the need for their translators, so Gemal Helal and Bouthaina Shabban remained. The final request caught Asad off guard: Clinton asked that Dennis Ross remain, because he had something to present. As they headed toward the room, Asad agreed to Ross's attendance without requesting as protocol that any additional delegates remain from his side, but he asked Clinton that Ross leave the room immediately after he presented his ideas, as Asad did not trust Ross. Clinton knew that over the years many Arab leaders had come to mistrust his special envoy, with his pro-Israel leanings. Not wishing to create any embarrassment, Clinton agreed to Asad's request.<sup>25</sup>

Only a handful of participants were in the room and privy to the actual conversation, though Sandy Berger and Rob Malley were able to eavesdrop on the conversation by hiding

behind a nearby wooden partition. Madeleine Albright, who was in the room, recalled that:

President Clinton began by thanking Asad for coming and acknowledging the physical difficulties the obviously ill leader faced. Asad replied, "I never get tired of seeing you." The president gave an abbreviated version of his "our children will thank us" speech . . . and said he was gratified that he had been able to earn the trust of Syria without losing the trust of Israel.<sup>26</sup>

According to Albright, Barak had given Clinton specific talking points which he insisted the president read word for word without deviation. Though Albright found this "patronizing" and "micromanaging," Clinton obeyed.<sup>27</sup> She stated:

Then [Clinton] said that he wanted to make a formal presentation of what the Israelis were prepared to do. Asad replied, "Fine, I will not respond until you finish, but what about territory?"

"The Israelis," said the president, "are prepared to withdraw fully to a *commonly agreed border*."

Asad said, "What do you mean by 'commonly agreed?'"<sup>28</sup>

Asad reportedly followed up with the riposte, "Is this the line of June 4, 1967?"<sup>29</sup>

For Asad, what ensued looked like the routine of a charlatan who reveals a concealed trick. Ross quickly presented a map based on the 1923 International Boundary, which completely enveloped all of the shoreline and water to which Syria was entitled to under the June 4 line, including both banks of the Jordan River and the Lake Tiberias beachhead. It was all about water.



Clinton, prepared for this contingency and wanting to break out his personal relations and lawyering skills, tried to ignore what had become the elephant in the room. He tried to get through Barak's script: "Let me continue! Israel will retain sovereignty along Lake Tiberias and a strip of territory . . ." <sup>30</sup>

But Asad had tuned Clinton out, simply remarking, "The Israelis don't want peace! There's no point in continuing!" A brief debate ensued. Clinton attempted to rationalize Barak's offer, citing the "unsteadiness of Israeli public opinion" and Barak's "shaky parliamentary coalition." <sup>31</sup>

Thinking as a politician, Clinton excused his own trickery and Barak's disheartening offer by saying to Asad that "Without sovereignty over the lake, Barak will never be able to sell the agreement [to the Israeli public]!" <sup>32</sup> According to Asad's translator, Shabban:

The issue was access to the water. Asad insisted on going back to the line of June 4 in which Syria had access to the water. The offer was to move Syria away from the water. The territory that was offered instead of water was a useless and rocky territory, and Asad knew it inch by inch. <sup>33</sup>

Though only twenty minutes had passed, the conversation abruptly ended in disaster. Ross did not leave the room, and when it was hinted that Barak was prepared to do more, Asad turned to Ross. Angry over the entire debacle and the impact it would have on future generations, Asad demanded, "I want to know what the Israelis have offered!"

"No!" Ross responded, appearing to be disappointed with what he would later bill as Asad's intransigence for not succumbing to his famed "incremental" tactic of using more time to produce further concessions. <sup>34</sup>

Clinton, who perhaps did not want to give the impression of anything less than total cohesion within his administration, did not weigh in. Ross, who was cranky and knew that the president would be upset, acted to perhaps divert Asad's

anger and throw him off guard by alleging to him that “certain members of the Syrian delegation had previously approved of the map.” Outraged, Asad turned to Shaara and asked him if it were true. Shaara denied this, and everyone began to note the shift in the ailing Asad’s physical demeanor. Walid Moallem opined:

Asad was very nervous—he felt he was cheated. I think that the Americans got some information that Asad was coming to the end of his life and wanted a deal, so they thought they could push a deal through that was less.<sup>35</sup>

As it appeared to everyone that the summit had failed, the U.S. negotiators listened as a vacant and withdrawn Asad began to wax nostalgic over the beaches where he used to barbecue and swim. Clinton, appearing not to understand the dimensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the importance that dignity has in Arab and Muslim culture, light-heartedly responded by offering what amounted to an Israeli swim pass. Clinton is reported to have said, “I’m sure the prime minister will give you permission to go swimming there again.”<sup>36</sup>

As the meeting broke and the doors swung open, Asad exited the room, managing to conceal his anger only with a smirk. There was one brief, final encounter with Albright, who was not aware of Clinton and Berger’s back-channel commitments regarding the Rabin deposit through Prince Bandar, and who, by all accounts, was exceptionally displeased with Asad’s reaction. According to Shabban, Asad remarked to Albright:

OK, now that we don’t have any peace process to work on, let us work on Syrian-U.S. relations. You know we have more time now. [Albright] said to him, “President, don’t be kidding. I don’t think the U.S. would have good relations with Syria until Syria signs a peace agreement with Israel.”<sup>37</sup>

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According to Albright, at the close of Geneva, the Syrians pleaded with President Clinton not to cast blame on them for the failure. Clinton allegedly gave it momentary consideration, and with some irony, granted them only that “the world will judge.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, immediately afterward, the world began to judge Asad to be the reason for Geneva’s failure, based on the initial spin and statements made by Clinton, Ross, and Barak.

It was President Clinton who started the momentum of blame against the Syrians—albeit vaguely—during a press conference the following day. Clinton said:

I went to Switzerland to meet President Asad, to clarify to him what I thought the options were and to hear from him what his needs are. I asked him to come back to me with what he thought ought to be done. So the ball is in his court now, and I’m going to look forward to hearing from him, and we’re going to talk about what else I can do, what else we can do together.<sup>39</sup>

Lamenting the failure of Geneva, Clinton, in keeping with the same practice after Shepherdstown of not criticizing Barak, instead conferred on him unconditional praise:

I think [the Israelis] are making very serious efforts. And I think Prime Minister Barak would like to do this as quickly as he can. And I can tell you they have made very, very serious efforts on all tracks, and I think you will continue to see progress at least on the Palestinian track and, of course, I hope we’ll have some progress on the Syrian one, as well—as well as in Lebanon.<sup>40</sup>

The following day in the Knesset, after Barak had just survived five votes of no confidence, Barak took Clinton’s face-

saving prevarications and, rather than quietly accept them and focus on the Palestinian track, began to blame Asad in order to maximize his own peacemaker image. Building on Clinton's statements, Barak added, "The positions have become clear, and the masks are off. Asad [is] not ready for the type of decisions that are necessary to reach a peace agreement."<sup>41</sup> Predictably, some of Barak's political problems abated, particularly with Shas and Yisrael Ba'Aliyah. Natan Sharansky sang Barak's praise for "not giving in to Asad," and Shas agreed to remain in his coalition government—at least for the time being.

To the Israeli left and center groups, which might have supported a full withdrawal from the Golan if presented by referendum, Barak handed them a new reality. Inching further from President Clinton's initial comments, Barak promoted a starker reason why Geneva failed: Peace, so long as Asad remained president, was impossible. Barak commented, "You need two to tango. We cannot change the Syrian leadership if it turns out it's not ripe for a peace agreement."<sup>42</sup> Barak's minister for internal security, Shlomo Ben Ami, who was considered one of the more left-leaning advisers, built on Barak's spin, telling Israeli radio listeners, "I've been saying for several years that there is no chance of reaching an accord with Syria—they have a North Korean mentality."<sup>43</sup> For those among the Israeli left who feared an escalation in Israeli-Syrian tensions and wanted to ensure that every possibility of making peace with Syria was exhausted, Barak's minister for Jerusalem affairs, Haim Ramon, assured that, "If, Heaven forbid, there is some kind of confrontation with Syria, the prime minister and all the leaders . . . can look in the eyes of the parents and the soldiers and say, 'We went above and beyond to reach peace, it didn't work out, *and not because of us!*'"<sup>44</sup>

But nothing could have further assured the Israeli public that their leadership was correct in placing blame on Syria than the corroboration quickly offered by Clinton just days afterward:

I don't think it's enough to say: "I don't like your position. Come back and see me when I like your position." If [President Assad] disagrees with [Israel's] territorial proposal, which is quite significant, then there should be some other proposal, I think, coming from the Syrians.<sup>45</sup>

Ross arrived in Jerusalem immediately following the collapse in Geneva and would be quoted just weeks afterward promoting a new theory on what happened. According to the *New York Post*:

U.S. envoy Dennis Ross and other Clinton aides believed Barak's offer would work and so the president invited Asad to Geneva. But Asad surprised Clinton by telling him that before the Six-Day War in 1967 he used to swim in the Sea of Galilee and would insist on returning to it.

"We found Asad more intransigent than his own people," Ross told Barak in Jerusalem a day after Geneva. He said that from the U.S. point of view, the Israeli positions were "logical and understandable"—and that when the minutes of the Geneva summit are made public, the world will be surprised at why it was impossible to overcome gaps that were so slim.<sup>46</sup>

Though far less savvy in its use of media communications, the Syrian government tried to get its message out in the Israeli press. A quote from Syrian Foreign Minister Shaara in the *Jerusalem Post* read:

What was proposed via Clinton [at Geneva] was control over the entire river and lake. This constitutes a retreat from Shepherdstown and from the Rabin deposit proper. There is an Israeli deposit with President Clinton in this regard. Ehud Barak acknowledged the existence of this deposit. We have American letters signed by President Clinton regarding the

deposit. So why should we abandon it, and how can we agree to something else? Our position is clear and firm on this.<sup>47</sup>

As victims of Clinton's perfidious mediation, the Syrians began to lose hope. Signaling that he no longer trusted the U.S. mediation role, Asad called for the immediate intervention of the European Union.

Meanwhile, back in Washington, Albright continued to believe that Asad had missed an opportunity until she had an epiphany just days afterward during a dinner with Prince Bandar. Bandar, who listened patiently as Albright "complained" about Asad's reaction at Geneva, was chagrined to realize that Clinton and Berger had not shared *any* of the details of the Bandar back channel with Albright.<sup>48</sup>

The left hand had not known the actions of the right. So Bandar, a Saudi, became the first person to communicate to an astonished Secretary Albright his own role as a secret envoy on behalf of the U.S. president before the summit. He revealed to her the explicit assurances Clinton had given Bandar: that he would issue Asad the invitation only if Clinton were able to relay his assurances that Barak was willing to deliver the Rabin deposit, and that the NSC's Bruce Riedel had conveyed that message. According to a public interview Prince Bandar gave nearly three years later, Albright reacted with both profanity and shock, saying, "Son of a bitch! *That Sandy*. Now I understand why Asad looked so stupid to me."<sup>49</sup>

Not long afterward, the mantra of blaming Asad for the failed Geneva summit was woven into the American newspaper and editorial debates. Amos Perlmutter, a professor at American University in Washington, DC, editor of the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and a columnist for the *Washington Times*, wrote in an opinion piece:

Jane Perlez in the March 28 *New York Times* correctly reported that Mr. Asad was "immovable," and above all

“appeared to have come to Geneva with the misconception that Mr. Clinton was in a position to give him what he wanted from Israel.”

The peripatetic dictator of Syria, the aging, rigid, Mr. Asad, has once again defied the American president. How many more times will the leader of the Free World, the only superpower, implore the anachronistic petty dictator of a minor and strategically insignificant country called Syria?

*The Washington Times* on March 29 reported Mr. Asad is seeking European Union intervention in the peace process. This is tantamount to saying he no longer considers President Clinton as a mediator. In fact, he is reported to have said Mr. Clinton is pro-Israeli. Then why did he invite the president to meet him in Geneva?<sup>50</sup>

Later, in the influential journal *Foreign Affairs*, Perlmutter disputed an article written by Henry Siegman, who concluded that Barak misread what kind of deal Asad would accept. Geneva failed, Perlmutter assured, because “most Israelis doubt that Asad wants peace and suspect he is angling for U.S. support to modernize his ailing army.”<sup>51</sup> Other Barak backers, like Uri Dromi, head of the Israeli Democracy Institute in Jerusalem, drew on the old Abba Eban maxim in describing the Geneva summit as a Syrian missed opportunity. With an air of hubris—even ridicule—over Israel’s ability to maintain its occupation and reap the literal fruits of the Golan, Dromi wrote in the *Boston Globe*.

American presidents, secretaries of state, and diplomats have all courted [Asad] for years. Arab leaders, mainly Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, coax him to hop on the peace wagon and bring hope to the peoples of the Middle East. And what is his clever response? A cough and a spit in the

face. Indeed, to borrow Abba Eban's immortal phrase, [Asad] never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity.

Peace with Israel might mean Israeli tourists, bringing with them the scent of freedom and democracy. Scary! Peace with Syria will probably have to be put on hold until Asad's successor takes over. In the meantime, Mr. Smart Guy can sit in Damascus and eat his heart out while we hold onto the Golan Heights and harvest its incredible grapes. I, for one, would never miss an opportunity to taste the great wines we make there.<sup>52</sup>

On May 23, 2000, the belief in Syrian culpability inevitably seeped into American presidential politics. Robert Zoellick, a foreign policy adviser<sup>53</sup> to presidential candidate George W. Bush, delivered a speech at an annual WINEP banquet in which he stated:

I was deeply troubled as an American to see President Bill Clinton go to Geneva and get stiffed by Hafez al-Assad. Now, at times the United States gets stiffed—I understand that. But frankly, to be honest, that's one of the roles of a secretary of state, not the President of the United States. I was honestly surprised he went to that meeting without knowing what he was going to get. That's what Madeleine Albright's job was.<sup>54</sup>

Leon Fuerth, a national security adviser to Vice President Gore, who was rumored to be Gore's top candidate for secretary of state upon a possible November victory and who had extensive contact with Secretary Albright throughout the campaign, could not allow the Clinton administration to be trashed in his presence. In an attempt to rebut Zoellick, Fuerth put forward an altogether new theory: "What makes you think the president didn't know what was supposed to happen? What makes you think that it wasn't Asad who, for



his own political reasons, flipped signals at the last moment, at the point of no return?"<sup>55</sup>

Later that same evening, in a speech before AIPAC's annual banquet, Gore must have picked up on Fuerth's suggestion. As if Asad had rejected an agreement that would have brought peace, Gore declared, "Syria may not choose to pursue peace for now. It is Syria's choice. But make no mistake: Syria has no right to pursue a course of conflict that denies peace to others!"<sup>56</sup>

Then-candidate Bush, who was not familiar enough with the details to comment, nevertheless felt comfortable in broadly criticizing Clinton's approach to the peace process. Before the AIPAC audience he observed only how, "in recent times, Washington has tried to make Israel conform to its own plans and timetables; but this is not the path to peace." He added, "Israel's adversaries should know that in my Administration, the special relations [with Israel] will continue if they cannot bring themselves to make true peace with the Jewish state."<sup>57</sup>

Richard Perle, a member of the WINEP board of advisers who was also a foreign policy and defense adviser to the Bush campaign, asserted pessimistically that Syria is "a country that supports terrorism. It's hard to imagine that [Asad] could ever become an instrument for peace."<sup>58</sup>

## *The Truth About Geneva*

**N**OT UNTIL OVER a year after the collapse of the Syrian track negotiations, in the summer of 2001, did the first lone voice of dissent raise questions about the widespread notion of Syrian culpability. In writing on the deleterious effects of the U.S. and Israeli campaign launched against the Palestinians after the Camp David II summit, Robert Malley—who was described by his White House peers as the most knowledgeable NSC adviser on the Arab-Israeli conflict—revealed that Barak had brought the same bad-faith baggage from the Syria track of negotiations over to the Palestinian track. Malley, a French-born Jew who later became a U.S. citizen, graduated from Oxford and as a young attorney had held a prestigious clerkship on the U.S. Supreme Court. He described the following scene from Camp David II, where Clinton exploded at Barak for “retracting on his previous positions” with the Palestinians:

In an extraordinary moment at Camp David, when Barak retracted some of his positions, the president confronted

him, expressing all his accumulated frustrations. “I can’t go see Arafat with a retrenchment! You can sell it; there is no way I can. This is not real. This is not serious. I went to Shepherdstown [for the Israeli-Syrian negotiations] and was told nothing by you for four days. I went to Geneva [for the summit with Asad] and felt like a wooden Indian doing your bidding. I will not let it happen here!”<sup>1</sup>

Malley’s criticism raised many eyebrows and produced several rebuttals, including one by Dennis Ross and another by Ehud Barak. Not surprisingly, Barak accused Malley of engaging in “pro-Palestinian propaganda” and later attributed Malley’s criticisms as the work of “some low-level American player.” He recalled the failures of the Syrian track far differently. By reiterating his prior description of events, even using some the same metaphors, Barak attributed the failure to the absence of a Syrian “partner” in peace:

We were very close. It was very clear to me that it could be reached. We will leave no stone unturned on the way to peace, and if there is a partner, there will be a peace agreement. But at the same time, it takes two to tango. You cannot impose peace. One party can impose war on the other side, but no party can impose peace on the other side. If there will be no partner, at least we will know the reality, however painful or frustrating, and we will stand united and could expect honest people. This was the strategy. It was said loud and clear from then.

Now, what really happened after Shepherdstown was that somehow Asad—and I now tell you my judgment—he found himself in declining health. He was aware of it. He was totally consumed by the need to ensure a succession process that will lead to power taken by his son Bashar, and it just consumed him.

At a certain point, he kind of shaped an approach that said, “If Israel is ready to capitulate to all my basic demands—even before the negotiations open, as a precondition for opening the negotiations—I will be ready to consider it.” But this is beyond what we [Israelis] can afford.<sup>2</sup>

As with any whistle-blower who alleges wrongdoing, Malley soon bore the brunt of political ostracism and anger from some of Clinton’s more outspoken pro-Israel political appointees, including his direct boss Sandy Berger, who was furious that Malley would disclose the private comments of the president.<sup>3</sup> Others among the vanguard of blame rallied to Israel’s defense. Ross corroborated Barak, with an apologetic account: “When we went to Geneva I had no expectation that it would be successful. I thought we had already missed the moment. We had missed the moment at Shepherdstown. That was the point—after Shepherdstown then, I think, Asad changed course.”<sup>4</sup> Indyk, who was rumored within the State Department to have fallen out of favor with President Clinton for failing to make his theory of “Syria first” work, likely based his account on that of Ross who attended Geneva, stating similarly that:

Barak was in a hurry, and so he formulated a proposal to Asad which included a commitment to full withdrawal to a line based on the line of June 4, 1967, with a request for control of 200 meters around Lake Tiberias. Now, you talk to different people and you get different answers. I was not at Geneva when the president presented that to Asad, so I only have second-hand reports.

From what I was told, my conclusion is that Asad went to Geneva to say no. He was no longer prepared to do a deal with Israel. He was coming to the end of his life. He had one project left in him, which was to put his son in power—he did

not actually complete that job because he didn't get rid of all the old guard around him. But for Asad, I believe that at the time he decided he didn't have the strength and it was too risky to get into a deal with Israel. So when he was ready, Barak wasn't. When Barak was ready, he wasn't.<sup>5</sup>

President Clinton's chief of staff, John Podesta, who was privy to the conversations at Geneva and who admitted his limited foreign-policy expertise, recalled that "Asad was just blown away" by the scenario. Said Podesta, "This was not a negotiation! This was a . . . *here was a generous offer; give me the reaction!*" Podesta went on to explain that had Asad said, "I think if you draw the line over here a little differently," then "that might have been a basis for negotiation. But Asad was just . . . taken aback by the whole thing."<sup>6</sup> Albright promoted her own explanation of the failure:

I think it failed because you had a stubborn President Asad on one side. And I do think that in many ways it was a Barak opening—I mean we had all kinds of ideas for this: That there could be a peace park. It would be, basically, a way to have an international thing. You know, we talked about it as the "Clinton peace park," or whatever. I mean I could understand it from both sides. The Israelis needed sovereignty to make sure that's their water supply, so they had to have it.

The amazing part is I had gone [to the Golan Heights] in 1986 when I was still a professor at Georgetown, and you look at it and the Golan Heights are . . . they overlook Israel. And it's such a completely different strategic thing for them to be up there with their guns versus the Israelis being left on top. And you can understand why they needed the protection . . .

I think he [Barak] couldn't [withdraw to the June 4, 1967, line]. He *did* need to have something. But they were—but we

were going to make up, or they were going to make up for whatever small percentage of land he was going to lose in some other place.<sup>7</sup>

Advised by Ross on all matters relating to the peace process, Albright invoked an illogical security argument that disregarded Syria's full accommodation of Israel's security needs, even to the point of allowing the presence of international and Israeli military observers on Syrian territory. Despite the Syrian willingness to disarm the entire Golan and fill it with military observers and UN monitors, Albright favored the hawkish Israeli skepticism that no matter what, there would always be the possibility of a breach in which the Syrians would somehow gain a military advantage over Israel and, to quote Albright, get "up there with their guns."

Such rationalizations by members of the U.S. team reveal how it was not just Barak but also a narrow cadre of U.S. negotiators who were not prepared to help Israel let go of its occupation. Albright, chief among them, was perhaps conditioned by years of running the gantlet for defending the "unshakable" U.S.-Israeli alliance as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. In her memoirs, she writes:

I did not approach the Middle East inflexibly except for one point. I had always believed that Israel was America's special ally and that we should do all we could to guarantee its security. Since Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, we helped Israel preserve regional military superiority so that its enemies couldn't destroy it. We provided generous help to Israel's partners in peace and endorsed the principle of land for peace embodied in UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338.<sup>8</sup>

If one is to believe that Albright followed this standard, here again it appeared that she could not have understood the security concessions offered by Syria, including Asad's willingness to continue leaving Israel's water sources undis-

turbed. Surely the 200 meters of land bordering the lake were not necessary to guarantee Israel's safety from a naval launch or a contamination raid of the lake (especially as the underground wells and overland tributaries leading to Lake Tiberias are well within Syria proper).

It seems, then, that given Syria's commitment to make full security concessions and the fact that it was highly unlikely that Syria—not known for loose internal policing—would allow saboteurs to surprise international monitors with a contamination attack and imperil Israeli's principal water source, Albright was insincere in saying that her support for Israel was only because of its "security."<sup>9</sup>

It turns out that Albright, like her heavily relied-upon adviser Dennis Ross, also felt that as the victors in its preemptive 1967 war, the Israelis were "reasonable" in holding out for a little additional land and, though not mentioned anywhere in Resolution 242, that they could also squeeze out the ability to keep all the water and beachfront while claiming it under the broad category of "security." Ross, who held tremendous influence over the president until Geneva, had Clinton, Albright, and others convinced that "support for Israel" should also mean strong allegiance to Barak's domestic political needs, and certainly no pressure on Israel to make concessions beyond Barak's level of comfort.

Despite having learned—in 2000, directly after Geneva—of the explicit assurances given to Asad by Prince Bandar on behalf of Clinton, Albright refused to amend the historical record with this information in interviews or in her best-selling autobiography, released in September 2003. In an interview in July 2003, she elaborated:

I think Asad came—I don't know why . . . have you read the Bandar piece [in the March 23, 2003, *New Yorker*]?

He [Asad] somehow had a different impression of what he was coming there to do—why, I don't know. . . . We get in there and

the president—Barak gave the president kind of a “scenario,” which I actually thought was kind of patronizing—micro managing—and that it was to present this idea. And the minute that Clinton kind of got finished with that then Asad asked a question about—the issue was that they would withdraw to a common boundary. And Asad says, “What do you mean a common boundary?” And, then it was . . . you know, when the president said, “Well, I want to talk to you about this.”

Then basically Asad said, “Well, if I’m not going to get it all back this is finished!” So Asad never even looked at what some of the ideas were that Clinton was presenting and—I don’t know whether the mistake was going there at all—because I do think that there should have been something between putting the president in that position. But Barak basically always wanted Clinton out there, out front, saying that “Clinton’s ability to present the case” or “knock heads together,” or whatever . . .<sup>10</sup>

The general lack of coordination at the highest levels of the Clinton administration, coupled with reliance on the opinions of advisers like Ross and Indyk, was detrimental to the outcome of the negotiations. Albright expressed disbelief in Asad’s refusal of the Geneva offer, saying, “It was just a strip [of land] that would have permitted some sense of security for the Israelis as far as the water was controlled. And so Asad basically gave up 99 percent of what he had for the 1 percent—or less than 1 percent—that he didn’t have!”<sup>11</sup>

Albright would also marginalize the Palestinians’ territorial rights—despite the fact that the Palestinians, unlike Asad, were even willing to consider some forfeiture of land based on an uneven ratio at negotiations later that year. Palestinian legal adviser Omar Dajani explained:

We met in Washington to consider Israel’s annexation of up to 2 percent of the West Bank, then U.S. Secretary of State



Madeleine Albright told them: “You say you need 98 percent of the West Bank. The Israelis say they need it to be 92 percent. The obvious compromise is 94 to 96 percent.” A plea to the Secretary by Mohammed Dahlan not to reduce needs to bazaar-style bargaining fell on deaf ears.<sup>12</sup>

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To seasoned experts of the Middle East conflict, the Clinton administration failed because it did not confront the Israeli leadership concerning their commitment to the process. William Quandt, a historian at the University of Virginia who gained his expertise through both academic study and public service as a former NSC staffer to President Jimmy Carter, compared the efforts of Carter and Clinton. Though Carter would later receive the Nobel Prize for U.S. mediation between Israelis and Egyptians—including his display of political courage in showing “tough love” for Israel by convincing Prime Minister Menachem Begin to give up the Egyptian Sinai—it was principled political advisers like Quandt who were a critical ingredient in making that summit a success.

When asked to offer his opinion on what the Clinton administration did wrong at Geneva, Quandt said:

I think Clinton should have said to [Barak], “There is only one basis on which I am going to help you on that front: If you are willing to give back every square-inch of the Golan Heights, I will go and see Asad tomorrow and we’ll have a deal next week. But I guarantee you—less than that, and we’re not going to get a deal. I know the guy. If you are prepared to go that far then by all means, let’s start with Syria. But let’s not waste our time on the Syrian front if you’re not prepared to go that far.”

I’m convinced that Clinton never had that conversation with him. Yet everyone who has dealt with Syria knows that while

Hafez al-Assad was president, that was the *sine qua non*. Instead of doing that Clinton said, “Well, let’s give it a try!” You know, Bill Clinton never met a problem he couldn’t find a compromise to, and we wasted most of the first year on the Syrian front, and at the end we had nothing to show for it.<sup>13</sup>

When I raised this issue with Ross and Indyk, some contradictory accounts emerged. Ross contended that Clinton did not have a conversation—such as the one proposed by Quandt—with Barak.<sup>14</sup> But Indyk, then in Tel Aviv, believed that he did. Indyk stated:

Yeah, there were lots of conversations with Barak. Barak knew he was going to have to give them all up. He was looking for cover to be able to sell it to the Israelis. That’s why I say the 200 meters was an effective opening position. He indicated to the president in a phone call before the president left for Geneva that he was willing to do more than that.<sup>15</sup>

A former State Department political appointee who was directly involved believed that Ross was the only one who knew Barak’s bottom lines:

A meeting took place right after Geneva between Dennis Ross and Congressman [Sam] Gejdenson, who at the time was the ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee. Gejdenson, who was very pro-Israeli, specifically asked Dennis why Geneva failed. Ross told him that Barak had crafted a number of steps but they never got presented because Asad said “no.” Gejdenson specifically pressed Ross on what happened, and asked, “Could you let me know what those steps were?”

Dennis said, “I couldn’t even lay out what the Israelis were willing to do, because the answer was no—and emphatically

no! I wasn't permitted to lay those out to Asad—he wouldn't even hear them!—and I won't lay them out for you.”<sup>16</sup>

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Another participant and observer of the negotiations is Gemal Helal, an influential State Department career professional who carries the deceptively modest title of “Arabic translator to the president, national security advisor, and secretary of state.” He has been an influential figure in advising President’s Clinton and George W. Bush on U.S. foreign policy related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. As the only Arab-American who negotiated in several of the Oslo peace process venues, Helal’s input has been solicited by his White House and State Department colleagues on policy matters far more important than Arabic translation.<sup>17</sup> Over the course of several meetings and phone interviews with me, Helal assessed his understanding of Barak and Clinton’s failed mediation efforts at Geneva. The sticking point, according to Helal, is the prior historical implementations of Resolution 242 and the broader issue of whether a Syrian-Israeli peace can preclude a Palestinian-Israeli peace. According to Helal:

Resolution 242 was an issue during the Syrian negotiations, which preceded Camp David II, as the Syrians wanted 100 percent of territories. For Syrians, all the land must be returned in exchange for peace. This is the basis for all agreements: It was applied in Egypt, [and] it worked for Jordan also [though a piece of territory was leased, and the part Israel controls is a leased territory]. In theory, Jordan also received 100 percent of their territory back. This theory was applied by Syria at Geneva.

On the old [1923] maps and papers, Syrian territory goes between the last ten meters of borders, but there was no

Israel on the map at the time. The border was never static; it was always shifting. On the eve of the 1967 war, the Syrians had control of the water line. They would fish and swim there. The Syrians wanted to go back to the lake, because they perceived it as their right. However, in regards to water, the rules of international law will dictate this. The water itself was an international issue, and the Syrians would be willing to work around it—but not the territories.

Helal also addressed Clinton's idea of creating a peace park in the area, and the reason it failed:

An idea was posed to make it an international park, which was rebuked by the Syrians, and the Israelis came up with clever ideas. They wanted to swap land and territory in al-Hama, thus actually giving the Syrians 100 percent. The Syrians said no, based on, "I want *this* land."

Finally, Helal questioned the wisdom behind the policy advice Indyk gave to Clinton:

[Indyk] believed that it didn't matter who rules in Ramallah: Syria is a strategic threat and they must reach an agreement. Martin misunderstood the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict; that the Arab countries would sympathize more with the Palestinians and their plight than with their individual countries. Martin saw it more from "who has the chemical weapons, who could win the war." He saw it as the size and the threat of the Syrian army versus the Palestinians, who weren't as armed and could be controlled. He felt that if they could cut a deal with Syria then normalization with the Arab world would be rational.<sup>18</sup>

Another participant in the negotiations was Toni Verstandig. She understood the Syria-first rationale, but questioned U.S. implementation and dynamics of the policy—in particular, Barak’s ability to heavily influence Clinton. She stated:

I understood the rationale between emphasizing Syria first, mostly because the Syrian issues were far more compartmentalized and could be handled in some cases more easily. Whereas, while the Israeli-Palestinian track was definitely the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and a comprehensive peace could not be achieved without having achieved agreement on that track, they were far more complex issues because they were so intertwined with Israel. In terms of demographics, in terms of the land, the location of borders, the economic issues, water, you had this underpinning of a very intricate fabric that wasn’t easily split—as [it] was with the Syrian issues. You *could* live with an Israel-Syria peace agreement in the context of a cold peace and it wouldn’t have that much of an implication. You *couldn’t* in the context of Palestinians.

One of my concerns throughout was our lack of constancy. What I mean by that was [that] we responded too easily to the internal political dynamics of Israel. Which meant we shifted gears, oftentimes, whether it was on issues or approaches; which is what lead to Syria first versus Israeli-Palestine [first].

Verstandig assessed the factors that influenced the president most:

Indyk was always consistent [on Syria-first]. I don’t know that anybody else was consistent. [But] Clinton really took the lead more from the Israelis. He supported Indyk in terms of when we pushed, he was there. But Clinton was far more influenced by the dynamic between [himself] and the particular Israeli prime minister.

Now, when he had a very close relationship with that prime minister, like Barak, he was more inclined to embrace Syria-first. . . . I think one of the lessons learned will be the damage done by the synergy between the tracks, and playing one off against the other. And whether we were merely accomplices or whether we were a driving force is really yet to be seen.<sup>19</sup>

Bruce Riedel, Clinton's senior director for Near East affairs at the NSC, who had given U.S. assurances to the Saudis that Clinton had succeeded in getting Barak to commit to the Rabin deposit, declined to discuss this issue. At the same time, he lamented the ultimate harm that the collapse of Geneva had, and what the United States could have done to make the Syrian track successful:

Insufficient attention has been focused on the Syrian track in 2000 and how the failure of the Geneva summit was a major blow to Barak and Clinton and reduced Arafat's room for maneuver in the Arab world. In retrospect the U.S. should have pressured harder to get a deal with Syria and put down its own ideas about resolving the outstanding territorial issues on that front.<sup>20</sup>

Ned Walker, who rose through the ranks to become ambassador to Israel and assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, was repeatedly used by the Clinton administration to convey messages on behalf of Clinton, in part because of his deep knowledge of the region and excellent personal relationships with Arab leaders. Walker, now retired, sees the failure of Geneva more broadly than Riedel:

I'd say it was a major blow to Asad, Barak, and Clinton. I think Asad came thinking that a deal had been cut. He could come home a victor, have his son anointed, and there would

be this smooth transition. And when he got to the summit—I was not there but I had been reported to by various people—that what he had expected, based on the messages he received from the administration—from Prince Bandar bin Sultan—that he had expected a 1967 border agreement. The minute he heard that wasn't what was coming out of Clinton's mouth—he just turned off.

Like Verstandig, Walker believed that, though it was something Indyk favored, when it came to Syria, Clinton took his marching orders from Barak:

Nobody was telling Barak what to do. President Clinton was fully supportive of Barak. I don't think if anyone had stood up and said "this doesn't make sense," that anybody would have listened! Barak was just . . . he was in the driver's seat throughout this thing. He pushed for the Camp David thing. He set the timing of these things. He spent the six months or so on Syria, and it was only until after that collapse that he turned then to the Palestinian issue.

But no one was more influential with how the president carried out this policy than Dennis Ross. Walker described the internal arrangements:

When Secretary Albright hired me [as assistant secretary for Near East affairs] she said, "I want you to stay out of the negotiations—that's Dennis's job. You're to handle everything else in the Middle East, where we have interests and so on." So the whole portfolio of Israeli-Arab was strictly housed in Dennis's shop. That's not to say that Dennis didn't keep me informed all the time—he did. I never felt like I was being cut out, but Secretary Albright made it clear who her negotiating team was. She said, "I've got one negotiator, that's Dennis, *and that's it!*"

With visible disappointment and frustration, Walker recalled the reason he believed Geneva failed. According to Walker, just before Geneva:

Dennis went to Barak, and Barak told him he could make an adjustment on that [Syrian] front with a tradeoff of land—the total area [being] the same [that had been done at Jordan]. Basically, when Dennis went to Barak on that line, they thought that the thirty yards [sic] was inconsequential! It was a rounding error! And that because it would be compensated. . . . But Asad didn't care two hoots about the territory! He cared about the image, stature, and being able to say, "I got the same thing the Egyptians got in the Arab world with Camp David 1978," and the Jordanians too in 1994. He couldn't go home and say, "I got less."

Clinton felt that was close enough to take it to Asad, and had misjudged what Asad was hearing. Now, to be fair to Clinton, I don't know quite what happened in this game of "whisper down the lane." But I think Bandar had a different impression of what Clinton had told him. And when Bandar conveyed it to Asad, Asad jumped on it. So you'll have to get Bandar on this one, but he feels that Asad was screwed and that he was screwed because he had heard one thing from Clinton and then delivered something else. He felt [that] he was burned by that. He didn't lie!

Walker also did not find plausible either Indyk's or Ross's belief that Asad went to Geneva to say no. Walker believes they hold this view:

Because he [Asad] didn't say yes! Asad didn't go to Geneva to say no. He went there with a full deck of negotiators. He went there assuming he would be able to say yes. The problem was that Clinton-talking-to-Bandar was a different track than Dennis-talking-to-Barak.



And, I don't know whether Dennis ever got together with Bandar to figure out what happened, but I know something screwy happened in there. And the message that Asad was getting, which he thought was accurate, didn't work. According to Bandar, Clinton told him, "Look, tell Asad he can get what he needs." He can get what he needs! But . . . Clinton certainly saw it in terms of, "What's a little bit of territory here or there?" I mean, he didn't say he can get what he *wants*; he said he can get what he *needs*!

But I can guarantee you Dennis is dead wrong. Asad wouldn't have come to Geneva if he had thought there was no deal. I mean, what in the hell does he get out of it? What did Dennis say that he got out of it that he would do that? Asad has a lot of ways of saying no, and that's not one of them! I mean he says no by not showing up in the first place.

Perhaps believing that his criticism had gone too far, Walker backed off and attributed the inveigling of Asad to mere "confusion":

Dennis has some vested interest in this whole thing but the thing is, it wasn't his fault. I think he thought he had an extremely good deal . . .

It [the failure of Geneva] would have been predictable if we had known what in the hell everybody was doing. But I think there was an actual, genuine confusion. I don't think anybody was ill-willed, or trying to make a problem here. I think there was some confusion, and it happens in negotiations when you don't have direct conversation through principals or when you have intermediaries who are not your own people. I think it's a mistake to use somebody like Bandar in a case like that. And I don't mean anything against Bandar, but *he can't speak for the United States!*<sup>21</sup>

Walker also substantiated that if what President Clinton told Bandar or Asad was that he will “give him what he wants” or “will please him,” Asad could have been expected to interpret that as an explicit withdrawal to the June 4, 1967, line. Walker said, “Yes, Asad was always clear on that.”<sup>22</sup>

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If anything constructive can emerge from the absence of peace between Israelis and Syrians or, for that matter, Americans and Syrians following Geneva, it is that, perhaps for the first time, the failure has brought some Israeli and Syrian negotiators to a point of agreement. Through separate interviews with Syrian negotiators Bouthaina Shabban, Walid Moallem, and Riad Daoudi, and Israeli negotiators Uri Sagi and Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, I have discovered that both sides are irritated with the prominent Barak-Clinton-Albright-Ross-Indyk version of events.

While discussing the failures of Camp David II on the Palestinian track, Israeli negotiator Lipkin-Shahak provoked the following question:

Shepherdstown is a very good question for your next thesis. . . . Why didn't the Americans learn the lesson of Shepherdstown? Before Camp David II, the agreement with Syria was touchable. And then Barak at Shepherdstown got cold feet! Barak withdrew from something that was touchable then, because Barak made it understood to the Americans and to the Syrians [before at Blair House] that he will be willing to withdraw to the 4th of June line.

Like Ross and Indyk, Shahak believes that an opportunity was missed at Shepherdstown, but it wasn't because of the leak. He says, “In January 2000 it was clear after Shepherdstown that dialogue with Syria failed. It was not because of the leak. *The*

*leak was not even an excuse.* The dialogue failed because I think that Barak understood that the Israelis are not yet ready to give up to Syria a presence on the Lake of Galilee.”<sup>23</sup>

Uri Sagi, Barak’s lead negotiator, concurred, adding that “one can assume that the Syrians could have understood that the [Rabin] deposit still exists. But the deposit wasn’t the issue. Put it this way: if I were the Syrian president, Mr. Asad, I would have believed that the [Rabin] deposit was in [a] very safe pocket.”<sup>24</sup>

These characterizations stand in stark contrast to Albright’s description of Shepherdstown. When asked if Shepherdstown was a missed opportunity, she replied, “Not if Asad had wanted to make a decision.” Unlike Albright, Sagi believes that Shepherdstown failed because “Barak . . . became afraid of not being able to convince the public opinion in our country—Israel—so he got not only cold shoulder but hesitant. This was a big change for Syria.”

Moreover, Sagi had the following to say in response to Ross’s statement that Asad went to Geneva to say no:

No? Just the opposite! He came to say *yes*. In order to say no, he could have said so and stayed in Damascus! Dennis is wrong. Why, then, did he [Asad] order 135 rooms in the Intercontinental Hotel for his team? Why? What is the purpose of inviting so many people? I tend to disagree. There were two main failures: the first, Shepherdstown, the second, Geneva. Mainly because of the parties involved, and mostly because the Americans did not prepare properly.<sup>25</sup>

Sagi declined to expound further on what the United States did wrong. Walid Moaellem agrees with Sagi in principle. In response to Ross’s quote, Moaellem said:

Dennis Ross is saying that he didn’t prepare well. He knows he didn’t prepare well. Otherwise, by God’s sake, how can

you bring two leaders to a summit beforehand to fail—unless you planned it to be a failure? If you advise a president to go and you know it will fail, is it honest to advise him to go? It was planned to be a summit failure so they could open the way for Barak to withdraw unilaterally from southern Lebanon. This was the essence of Geneva. What Dennis Ross said shows we came very near to the agreement. Asad went to Geneva ready for peace based on the assurances obtained by Clinton. Barak was reluctant; he was hesitant.

Though some Israelis were hesitant to specifically name the people they hold responsible, the Syrians had no qualms. Moallem further stated:

Dennis is my friend and used to be my partner, but unfortunately, instead of pushing ahead to conclude the agreement to where we came very near, he was listening too much to what the Israelis want. If the polls in Israel tell Barak not to do this, Dennis would play the role to justify why Barak was not doing this.

Why would the parties now hold Ross individually responsible? Without being made privy to Walker's description of the internal State Department arrangements, Moallem indicated why Ross should bear responsibility:

Dennis Ross was the coordinator, he told us he accepted it on the condition that nobody could advise Clinton on the peace process except him. [Just one week after he was appointed peace coordinator in 1993] he told me everything had to come through him. Dennis was responsible for the peace process. Dennis Ross was accompanying [the] talks with Israel since day one. He was aware of Rabin's deposit, about Peres's assurance, and Barak's assurance. In this region every inch of your territory is important. UN

Security Council Resolution 242 speaks about the conflict in June 1967—from day one in the peace process Syria spoke of the June 4, 1967, line.<sup>26</sup>

In a separate interview Riad Daoudi agreed:

Throughout the process, the only thing that Dennis was opposed to is what the Israelis were opposed to. A mediator has to listen to both sides and say objectively, “This is what you should do.” But when you are favoring the position of one over the other—in meetings, information, whatever—it seems to us that all the time Dennis was playing the game on the other side on all negotiating tracks, including Palestine, and trying to favor Israel.<sup>27</sup>

Indyk’s remark, which described the Geneva offer to allow Israel to keep the 200 meters as Barak’s “effective opening position,” also drew strong criticisms. Ned Walker responded, “Then it’s *even more tragic* that the ‘whisper down the lane’ syndrome struck here!”<sup>28</sup> Moallem, in turn, said:

We came to Shepherdstown on American assurances that Shepherdstown would become the last meeting on all the elements. Since Barak arrived, he asked Martin to come to [the] plane and said he couldn’t. I learned of this in May 2002, when Martin told me what happened. He said he was going to write about it in his memoirs. . . . Nobody told us Barak’s hesitation. Why didn’t Martin Indyk convey this to Madeleine Albright or Clinton?<sup>29</sup>

As Bruce Riedel earlier alluded, the failure of the United States to pressure Barak harder in his moment of hesitation created the ultimate disaster. Sagi, who appears haunted by his own knowledge that Barak was willing to do more at Geneva, said:

You know, these are still very specific, sensitive issues! They came down to ten meters. Not precisely to the water. [But] he was prepared to go beyond that. I prefer to keep it in my knowledge. He was prepared to go all the way. But eventually he got hesitation.<sup>30</sup>

Moallem expertly spotted what led to Barak's hesitation:

Barak should have prepared his public. He tried to use it as a tactic to buy time or win an election. He should have looked to the future and not looked back to the past. This is how we understand peace. Speak of a just peace because it is just for both sides. Speak of a durable peace because it is durable for both sides!<sup>31</sup>

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The frenetic pace of negotiations that continued beyond Geneva until the last hours of Clinton's presidency in January 2001 brought no public reversal of the "blame Syria" story by any members of the Clinton administration. In fact, as will be explored in the following chapters, almost the identical scenario of blame would play out after the conclusion of the Israeli-Palestinian Camp David II summit, with far more tragic consequences.