Middle East Peace: Mirage on the Horizon?

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Middle East Peace: Mirage on the Horizon?

Last spring, when Ehud Barak was elected to replace Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel's prime minister, most observers of the Middle East seemed convinced that peace would be achieved, or at least well on its way, by the time the new millennium arrived. Barak was far wiser, less demagogic, and more aware of the advantages of peace than his predecessor. Both his people and his party stood with him on peacemaking, and Arabs everywhere seemed well disposed to what they saw as Israel's new attitude. Few could fail to detect the scent of hope in the air.

Yet the leaves have fallen, the days have shortened, and the negotiators have accomplished very little. The old enemies who in May had spoken so warmly of one another were by September already exchanging the Middle East's traditional cold invective. What intruded between the flirtation and the embrace? Though politicians and press have made much of hesitant steps toward "final status" negotiations, the obstacles that stand between the parties have not budged. Even the optimists—those who believe the momentum toward peace, despite setbacks, is irreversible—have had to admit, as the second millennium closed, that the third may have gray in its hair before the neighbors so long at war will finally achieve a reconciliation.

Just take Jerusalem, the centerpiece of any peace accord. In being more ideological than practical, the Jerusalem problem should be manageable and if resolved is likely to open the door to solutions to all the other major differences. Yet nothing on Jerusalem has changed. If anything, the sides have hardened. Jerusalem is a city whose population is roughly three-fourths Jewish, one-fourth Arab. For the Jews, it is the essence of their dreams of re-

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turn, King David's capital, the core of Zionism. "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem," says the psalm known to all Jews, "let my right hand forget her cunning." For the Arabs, it has been an Islamic city since the seventh century, the place from which Muhammad ascended to heaven, behind only Mecca and Medina as an object of pilgrimage. The Dome of the Rock on the Haram al-Sharif, where Solomon's temple once stood, is now dear to every Muslim. It is true that both Jews and Arabs feel a deep cultural and religious attachment to Jerusalem, but does that make a secular compromise over its rule impossible?

When Israel's war of independence ended in 1948, the Jews held Jewish (West) Jerusalem, while the Arabs held Arab (East) Jerusalem and the Old City. Barbed wire separated the two sectors, and crossing from one side to the other was barred. Jews cannot forget that, in this era of deep mutual hatred, they were denied access to their own sacred shrine, traditionally known as the Wailing Wall, where they lamented the destruction of the temple. In 1967, victorious in the Six-Day War, the Israeli government annexed the eastern sector, removed the barriers, and vowed that Jerusalem would never be dismembered again.

No Arab I have ever met disagrees with Israel's decision to restore Jerusalem's unity. The overwhelming Arab consensus is that segmentation was a bad idea. The Arab claim to Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state does not call for conventional sovereignty. It calls, instead, for "shared" sovereignty, permitting Arabs to govern themselves and administer their religious shrines, while the city itself remains open and intact. Many Jews sympathize with the Arab claim, and very plausible proposals have been drawn up for sectoral self-government within the context of unity. Ideology aside, such an arrangement does not appear beyond the capacity of the two sides to devise and implement.

On a practical level there is unquestionably room for an agreement. The Israelis—save for a handful of extremists who dream of rebuilding Solomon's temple—have no interest in presiding over Islam's holy places. Zionism's realization hardly requires Jews to rule over the shops where Arabs offer for sale kebabs and *kuffiyahs*. The Arabs, on the other hand, never in any age had Jerusalem as a political capital. It is true that Arab Jerusalem is for today's Palestinians the heart of its nation-in-the-making. Jerusalem's history gives them an identity; its shrines give them status in the Islamic world. But like Washington or Islamabad or Brasilia, a capital can be established anywhere that politics deems fitting.

Yet Barak, on the night of his election, proclaimed to his cheering supporters that, notwithstanding the high priority he attached to making peace, he would never consent to diluting Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem. Intel-

ligent man that he is, he certainly understood the statement's internal contradiction. It is unimaginable that Yasser Arafat, his Palestinian counterpart, can sign a document that formally concedes Arab Jerusalem to the Jews. The Palestinian people would not stand for it. Moreover, no Islamic country—not Saudi Arabia, not Morocco, not Jordan—would endorse a juridical surrender of the Muslim holy places. Indeed, if such a treaty were signed, it would be an invitation to dispatch Arafat and resume the Arab-Israeli wars.

But that was not all. In the same speech, Barak went beyond Jerusalem to articulate what have since been called the "four no's" or, sometimes, the "four red lines." Besides Jerusalem, there was to be no return to the 1967 border, no foreign army west of the Jordan River, and no abolishment of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the areas conquered in 1967.

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The additional three were less sticky than the Jerusalem "no." Since the 1967 border was, in fact, the truce line fixed when the fighting stopped in 1948, both sides acknowledged some logic in modifying it. The second point, the ban on any foreign army, had long since been part of a Middle East consensus on Arab demilitarization, to which Arafat himself subscribed. As for the settlements, that was tougher but not intractable. Though Arafat's official position was that the settlements, being illegal, had to go, realistically he did not expect Barak to agree to more than their consolidation, both in Gaza and the West Bank. Both sides' talks of clustering existing settlements near the old border has—though Barak continued to allow settlements—to expand throughout the territory. Equally important to Arafat, however, was Barak's omission of a "no" on establishment of a Palestinian state. Having conceded that point, Barak seemed to be suggesting the possibility of compromise on borders and settlements. A reasonable compromise would permit the Palestinians to realize their dream of having a state that was politically and economically viable.

It is interesting that Barak's "four no's" did not, at the time, diminish the euphoria of his election either in Israel or among the Arabs. Israel's peace camp was so happy at Netanyahu's defeat that it scarcely noticed the speech. The Arab leadership, though it took note of the "no's," chose to lay aside its concerns and give Barak, as a newcomer, the benefit of the doubt.

I was able to interview some of these leaders on a swing through the region during this period. Salim al-Hoss, Lebanon's prime minister, was the

most skeptical of Barak's intentions. Arafat, over lunch, insisted it was too early to reach a judgment, though the entourage of young men seated around him was much less forgiving. The most positive of the Arab leaders was Syrian foreign minister Farouk al-Sharaa, who insisted that Barak's "no" concerning the 1967 borders applied only to the Palestinians, not to Syria, and he expressed confidence that talks would get underway promptly and might be successfully concluded within a few months.

A week or so later, Syrian president Hafez al-Assad and Barak exchanged unprecedented compliments in the press, Assad referring to Barak as "strong and honest," Barak praising Assad for building a "strong, independent and self-confident Syria." Assad said Barak "clearly wants to achieve peace with Syria," and Barak replied that Syria was the "cornerstone of peace." The exchange persuaded many that a Syrian-Israeli treaty was, as a practical matter, a done deal.

But while these pleasantries were being exchanged, Barak was engaged in tough negotiations with Israel's political parties over the formation of a coalition government. Notwithstanding his own very substantial victory, the newly elected Knesset, though different from its predecessor in many ways, was not notably more dovish. The extreme right-wing parties that opposed territorial withdrawal during Netanyahu's years were soundly defeated, but most of their votes went to Shas, a religious party far more interested in subsidies for its schools than in peace. Though defeated at the polls, the extreme right retained a constituency of some 400,000 settlers living in the occupied territories. The settlers' message was that, being good democrats, they would accept the election results, but should the new government attempt to evict them from their homes, they would resist strenuously. The strain of violence that had always run through the settler movement made clear that their threats could not be ignored.

Shas, despite its big electoral win, actually emerged weaker than it had been, largely because it could not exercise over Barak the influence it had within the unstable Netanyahu government. It was also weakened by the other unexpected victors in the Knesset election, the avowedly secular parties, particularly Shinui, whose principal goal was to reduce religious influence on Israel's political life.

What the new Knesset revealed was, first, that Israel was continuing a slow drift toward a consensus on making peace. The public opinion polls consistently showed that 75 percent of Israelis favored an Arab-Israeli rapprochement. But the election also made clear that the country was now more deeply split than ever along religious-secular lines, which effectively served as a barrier to peace. Barak, though personally secular, had campaigned on a platform that placed less emphasis on peace less than on miti-

gating religious-secular discord. To form a cabinet, he had to choose between placing his priority on concessions to the peace parties and the Arabs, which would inevitably stir up social animosities, or on the repair of Israel's fragile social fabric.

When Barak announced his choice after 45 days of bargaining, some thought he had succeeded in having it both ways by getting secular and religious parties into the coalition. His majority was nearly two-thirds of the 120-member parliament, a sharp contrast to that of the late Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin, who embarked on his peace campaign with only 61 votes, five of them from the Arab parties. Barak's "wall-to-wall" coalition immunized him from the charge, leveled by right-wingers at Rabin, that he did not have a "Jewish" majority. In absorbing the religious parties into the cabinet, however, he excluded the Arabs, who had won ten seats, as well as Shinui's pro-peace votes. This tilted his coalition toward the status quo on socio-religious issues, while providing him with diminished support for an aggressive peacemaking effort.

Seventy-five percent of Palestinians—the same figure as Israelis—favor the pursuit of peace.

Some commentators surmised that Shas had become his captive: if it wanted state subsidies for its religious institutions, it would have to vote for his peace program. But from the opposite perspective, if Shas joined the smaller religious parties in abandoning Barak, it would cost him the claim that he was making peace by national consensus. Since Barak also included Natan Sharansky's Russian party, which though secular is hawkish, it was not clear at all that his coalition contained a dovish majority.

Of course, Barak would have the option of reformulating the coalition at any point, turning for help in ratifying a peace agreement to the anticlerical Shinui and the Arab parties. But that would subject him to the dual accusation of being against religion and of making a "non-Jewish" peace. Rabin was hurt by these charges. They may even have cost him his life. Barak is unlikely to take such a risk. The result has been that, since his election, he has done much politicking to preserve his incongruous coalition, succeding in keeping the religious and secular forces from each other's throats, while accomplishing virtually nothing on the battlefield of peace.

What he has done, as one might expect of a former chief of staff and much decorated military hero, is stress Israel's military defenses. Within the Labor Party, Barak was always considered a hawk but, unlike his mentor Rabin, he has shown few signs of softening since becoming prime minister.

He has surrounded himself with retired army officers as advisors, what the press calls "Israel's second general-staff." Labor, the party he joined at Rabin's behest when he left the army, complains of being ignored. Cabinet members mutter that Barak does not debate at their regular meetings, much less solicit their opinions, but simply issues orders. Barak's view of a Palestinian state, it seems, consists of a series of enclaves—called *bantustans* by its critics—encircled by the Israeli security forces. This arrangement, a functional apartheid, is the compromise that hawkish Israelis are willing to make with the Palestinians. It also has the approval of the army, meeting Barak's standards for territorial defense.

Until the Palestinians can select new authoritative leaders, there will be no peace talks at all.

Barak seems to reject the notion that peace itself is a form of security. He has not acknowledged that, in the first quarter-century of its existence, Israel fought four costly wars against Egypt and, since making peace with Anwar Sadat in 1979, has fought none. Speaking before the National Defense College this summer, Barak put his psyche on display: "We live in a difficult region and environment which do not resemble North America or Western Europe," he said. "There is no pity or respect for the weak in the Middle East. Whoever is incapable of defending himself does not get a second chance."

Most Middle East leaders, both Israeli and Arab, expressed the view after the election that Barak would have to move quickly toward negotiations, observing that the United States, an indispensible partner, tends to lose interest in foreign affairs once its presidential campaign begins. Instead, in his visit to Washington in July (during which he and his wife stayed with the Clintons in Camp David), Barak asked the president not to intrude in peace talks at all, which he said he wanted to handle on his own. Clinton agreed, and to show his confidence in Barak, promised Israel fifty F-16 warplanes, along with helicopters, antiballistic missiles and communications equipment. In August, Germany delivered the first of three submarines capable of firing nuclear missiles. Meanwhile, Barak has defended military expenditures and negotiated for higher arms subsidies from Washington, keeping the lid on the allocations he pledged in his campaign for education, social services, and the environment.

In an interview in the newspaper *Ha'aretz,* Barak gave a clue to his peacemaking strategy.

I will not go to peace if I am not convinced it will strengthen the

> country's security. The Syrians have 700 airplanes, 4,000 tanks, 2,500 artillery pieces, and surface-to-surface missiles that are neatly organized and can cover the whole country with nerve gas. The Palestinians are the source of the legitimacy of the continuation of the conflict but they are the weakest of our adversaries. As a military threat, they are ludicrous.

If the statement held out the promise that Barak would soon enter serious negotiations with Damascus, it conveyed to Arafat that the Palestinians had very little to hope for at all.

Indeed, if the concept of negotiations is a give-and-take between adversaries, most Palestinians recognize that, in terms of Barak's values, they have little to give. Arafat possesses a demographic time bomb, built on the disparity between Israeli and Palestinian birth rates, but its detonation is a quarter-century away, too far for most Israelis to worry about. He can also hold over Barak's head the prospect of declaring statehood unilaterally, which he says that, in the absence of an agreement, he will do in the year 2000. But, having declared a state once, in 1988, he understands that it is a bluff. Such a declaration will not end the occupation. What good, he must ask himself, is a paper state, with Israel continuing to run the territory on which it sits?

Arafat understands as well as Barak that he has no military power with which to confront Israel. Officially, the Palestinians have abandoned "armed struggle." They waged a war of terror—the only war they were capable of conducting—against Israel for decades, but under the Oslo Accords, they have agreed to stop. They have further agreed to cooperate with Israel in suppressing the terrorist acts of dissident groups, most notably Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic movement. Arafat's people say that if there have been only a few terrorist acts against Israel since 1996, they should get most of the credit, and Central Intelligence Agency observers working in the region generally agree. Arafat faces a serious problem, however, in that his security forces have been as harsh as the Israeli occupiers in suppressing terrorism, costing him heavily in popular support.

Presumably Arafat has the option, without abridging agreements with Israel, of calling for nonviolent resistance. Most of the advance toward peace came, in fact, on the heels of the intifada, when young Palestinians, largely by throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, won worldwide sympathy to their cause. But Arafat, unable to control the intifada, was always cool to it. Currently he shows no interest in training his followers in non-violence, reasoning that the young firebrands who challenge Barak one day might rise up to challenge him the next. Rabin was influenced to pursue peace by the intifada's strategic impact on Israel. But Arafat, sitting down empty-handed, will be hard put to persuade Barak that Israeli security interests lie in following Rabin's precedent.

According to reliable polls, some 75 percent of Palestinians—the same

figure as Israelis—favor the pursuit of peace. Still, the surveys by the highly respected Center for Palestine Research and Studies show that two-thirds of them distrust Barak, and a majority say they see no difference between Barak and Netanyahu. Most Palestinians are pessimistic about peace prospects. Moreover, a majority says that, since the autonomy process began under the Oslo accords, their living conditions have worsened. Most Palestinians to whom I have talked say the burdens of occupation—travel restrictions, checkpoints, the bulldozing of homes, the limitation of permits to work in Israel—have actually become more onerous. The sense of despair that has grown since 1996 is reflected in the theoretical acceptance of violence against Israel, rising from 18 percent to 50 percent, though most of the 50 percent claim to see violence not as war but as an indispensable negotiating tactic.

Israel undoubtedly made a pledge on the Golan.

As for the popular view of Arafat and the Palestinian Authority, his executive body, more than two-thirds of Palestinians consider their rule to be corrupt, and an overwhelming number believe the abuses are worsening. Lamenting the absence of democracy and human rights at home, Palestinians, notwithstanding their hostility toward Israel, admire the Israeli constitutional system. Taken as a whole, the polls show Palestinians to be increasingly cynical, both about their government and its prospects of making peace. This cynicism increases the pressure on Arafat to deliver—or go.

As evidence of Arafat's weakness, when the Palestinian Authority in Netanyahu's last days called for mass protests against the construction of more Israeli settlements, hardly anyone showed up. When it ordered Palestinian workers to quit their jobs in Israeli settlements, almost no one did. Yet Arafat himself, whatever the popular reservations, has no rivals. If an election were held today, he would receive a healthy majority, which suggests that the Palestinian electorate looks to him not to lead them to good government. Rather, they see him as the sole figure with the necessary credibility to negotiate a peace with the enemy.

The polls, moreover, show that Arafat's "red lines"—however at odds with Barak's—are fully supported by his population. Palestinians seem to be at one on obtaining a share of Jerusalem. They continue to demand the release of all political prisoners, an issue that affects nearly every Palestinian family. Articulating a continued allegiance to United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 ("land for peace"), they indicate no willingness to surrender a substantial portion of their land, either in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, a position which foretells, at best, hard bargaining over Israel's

settlements and its territorial ambitions.

Clearly, Palestinian public opinion leaves Arafat little room for submitting to Israeli demands. His mandate is not just peace, but a peace with which Palestinians can live with self-respect. The underlying message the people convey is that if Arafat gives up too much he will fall, which will leave the region in chaos, a condition in which Israel can take no comfort. It will also mean that until the Palestinians can select new, authoritative leadership, which may take years, there will be no more peace talks at all.

Recently a new issue, the Palestinian refugees, has appeared on the negotiating screen—"new" not in that it has not been around since 1948, but in that it seems to have been overlooked for a couple of decades. Most of the credit for the issue's ebb from view should probably go to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which was established on a temporary basis to care for the refugees of the 1948 war. With scotch tape, string, and modest annual contributions from the international community, UNRWA has for a half a century provided for a tolerable standard of living and surprisingly good schools for the ever-growing refugee population. (Except for the *shebab* of the intifada, during which Israelis closed all Palestinian schools, refugees have an impressive rate of academic achievement.) Refuting the abuse often heaped on UN agencies, UNRWA has done exceptional work. But now the refugee issue is back on the screen, which may be explained by the serious thinking about peace, especially among the refugees themselves, that accompanied Barak's election. Unfortunately, the refugees constitute a problem that both sides acknowledge is all but insoluble.

No one knows exactly how many refugees there are. Israel puts the figure at two million, UNRWA says three-and-a-half, and Arab sources go as high as five million. UN resolutions dating back to 1948 affirm the refugees' right to return to their homeland or at the least to receive compensation for their lost property. The Arab states, in which most of them live, have historically insisted on following these UN resolutions to the letter.

Lebanon, having just ended a bloody civil war, is the most insistent, arguing with some justice that its society is too fragile to admit the refugees permanently. Up to a half-million still live in squalid camps, isolated from the general population, nursing old grievances. In Syria and Jordan, millions more have been largely integrated in the society, and for years neither government said much about them, raising a hope in international circles that in the issue would solve itself. But last September, Jordan, though already at peace with Israel, announced that its two million refugees would never be given official residence, making clear that the problem had not gone away.

On the refugee issue, Israelis left, right, and center are united. Though only the extreme right-wing places all the blame on the Arabs themselves,

few Israelis are willing to take more than passing responsibility for the problem. If the refugees want to relocate to a future Palestinian state, most Israelis say, that is a matter to be resolved among Arabs. But in virtual unanimity, they contend that the refugees, were they to resettle in Israel, would suffocate the country by their numbers, even if they did not seek to destroy it by terror or subversion. Mass repatriation, Israelis say, would equal national suicide. Israel's consensus, leaving little room for concessions, is that the refugees simply cannot come back.

Yet even the compensation option is complex. Countless Israelis live in the homes and till the fields that once belonged to Palestinians, but Israel has maintained throughout its history that it will consider payment, only within the context of an accounting for the losses, willingly incurred or not, of the Jews who immigrated from Arab countries. No one has ever estimated the sums on the table, but the number is in the many billions, including inflation and interest, if not the refugees' pain and suffering. By any calculation, even Israelis acknowledge that what they owe would be far greater than what Israel can claim. Meanwhile, the refugees themselves, their political consciousness stirred by the prospect of talks, have begun organizing, warning Arafat that he had better not deal them out of any final agreement he may reach.

Ironically, the refugees' case is not based just on the UN resolutions but has become intensified by Israel's successful demands for restitution from Germany for Jewish property lost during the Nazi era. To complicate Israel's position further, a newly founded association of Sephardim—Jewish immigrants from Arab lands, some 50 percent of the population—has announced that it would not permit the government to trade away their property claims for Arab losses. They insist that—whatever the deal with the Palestinian refugees—displaced Syrian or Iraqi or Egyptian Jews enjoy the same rights of restitution from their former homelands as those received by the victims of the Nazis.

And so, with the arrival of the millennium, the huge gap between Israel and the Palestinians appears, if anything, to be growing wider. Barak and Arafat have had a few cordial meetings. President Clinton brought them together in Oslo in November in a nostalgic but otherwise meaningless embrace. But apart from Barak's reluctant consent to implement segments of Netanyahu's Wye agreement—some small reversion of territory, the freeing of a few prisoners, the opening of a transit link between the West Bank and Gaza—there has been no real progress. The "red lines" remain firm. Meanwhile, the hopes for productive talks with Syria, which appeared so buoyant in the afterglow of the May election, have steadily receded.

Talks with Syria actually involve two separate negotiations, one with

Syria itself, the other with Lebanon, whose foreign policy Damascus effectively controls. For Israel, the Lebanese portfolio is of more immediate importance than the Syrian. Israel still has an army in its "security zone" in south Lebanon, the relic of its 1982 invasion. Every year, several dozen Israeli soldiers, along with some Lebanese mercenaries from the so-called South Lebanon Army, are killed by Lebanese guerillas, mostly from Hezbollah, a Shi'ite movement supported by Iran. Israel long ago acknowledged that its losses far exceed the security provided by its presence in Lebanon. During his campaign, Barak repeatedly vowed to bring the Israeli army home from Lebanon within a year.

Israel to be sure has always had the option of simply walking out of the security zone, but successive governments have declined to exercise it. Israel insists that if it leaves, Beirut must fill the vacuum with the Lebanese army, not just to safeguard Israel's northern border but to protect the Lebanese, mostly Christians, who have fought on its side. Israel's credibility and, in fact, its self-respect, would suffer a serious blow if, after a unilateral withdrawal, Hezbollah proceeded to massacre all those who had collaborated with its army for the past 15 years.

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Yet, notwithstanding his pledge to withdraw, Barak has reaffirmed the conventional Israeli demand on the Lebanese regime. Lebanon, however, says its army will not do Israel's dirty work and refuses Israel's invitation to bilateral talks, affirming that it will negotiate only in tandem with the Syrians, their masters. The Syrians, of course, delight in Barak's quandary in south Lebanon, which they rightly see as an asset that they can put to good use, not just in getting him to the table but in the ultimate give-and-take of negotiations themselves.

Last spring's promising overtures between Syria and Israel have led nowhere. The extolling of Barak in the Syrian press has given way to editorials, such as the one in *Al-Ba'ath*, the ruling party paper, which recently said it is "fatally wrong for any of us Arabs to entertain the idea that a change from Netanyahu to Barak means that things have changed in Israel ... (from) the expansionist, racist, aggressive program which has always constituted a common denominator for all leaders for the past fifty years." A visit to the Middle East in September by U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright failed to narrow the differences between the two parties. Barak now seems no closer to the table than Netanyahu was.

The sticking point between the two, of course, is the Golan Heights,

which Syria lost to Israel in 1967. Assad contends that in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations that began in 1993 when Rabin was prime minister, Israel conceded the Golan's full return. He says the parties were in discussions on mutual security requirements when Israel, after Rabin's assassination, abruptly broke them off to go into elections. Assad has said repeatedly that he is not interested in a peace that will not fully restore the Golan and demands that the talks pick up where they were suspended four years ago.

The prospect looms for a continuation of the Israeli-Syrian stalemate well into the next millennium.

Barak, who clearly has his own view on the Golan, has not been willing to accede to Assad's terms. Though some dispute exists on how binding it was, Israel undoubtedly made a pledge on the Golan. Itamar Rabinovich, Israel's chief negotiator at the time, acknowledges that, although Rabin talked in hypothetical terms and gave Syria a hard commitment, "he did make a commitment to the United States ... Over time, a hypothetical 'deposit' became, in U.S. eyes, a full commitment." State Department sources confirm that the Syrians are correct in believing they had an Israeli promise on the Golan, contingent on resolving the outstanding security questions. Moreover, Rabinovich said, Clinton asked Shimon Peres, Rabin's successor, whether he was committed to the Golan pledge, and "Peres too said that he was." It is true that no withdrawal would have been required in the absence of a full-fledged treaty. But the outstanding issues seemed on their way to being resolved when the talks were halted, and now Barak clearly wants to go back to the beginning.

Assad made clear that he means what he says, that he will make no peace without full restoration of the Golan. Powerful as he is in Syria, as the leader of a minority regime—an Alawite in a Sunni Muslim land—he cannot be insensitive to the politics of any deal. One explanation of his adamancy holds that, having been defense minister when the Golan was lost, his prestige requires him to get it back. Another says that Arab rivalry demands he accept no lesser deal than the Egyptians, who regained all their conquered territory in their treaty with Israel. The latest theory is that Assad needs peace—but with Syria restored to its territorial fullness—so that he can, with confidence, pass on the presidency to his son, Bashar. Syrians say Assad wants to deliver to Bashar a secure country within a stable Middle East. Strategically the Golan, only an hour's drive across flat terrain from Damascus, is vital. To promote his regional objectives, Assad has also made serious efforts to repair strains with Syria's other neighbors: Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan. No one

can object to policies directed at putting an end to the Middle East's traditional volatility—even if their objective is to improve the odds in favor of a smooth father-to-son succession—but Barak has yet to move.

Barak, in dealing with Syria, faces his own political difficulties. The polls show a deep ambivalence among Israelis about giving up the Golan. It would mean losing not only settlements but a significant strategic advantage over a country with substantial military power. Hawk that he is, Barak—unlike the more daring Rabin—is reluctant to take the chance. He would like a peace treaty, but one that permitted Israel to retain vital parts of the Golan. He is highly unlikely to get it, however, and so the prospect looms for a continuation of the Israeli-Syrian stalemate well into the new millennium.

Shimon Peres, Israel's 77-year-old political war horse, was virtually the only politician I encountered in my swing through the region who brought to the peace question a perspective that seemed worthy of a more open-minded era. Though embittered after a lifetime in politics in which election as Israel's prime minister has always eluded him, Peres is intellectually as creative as ever. Barak imparted to him the title of minister of regional cooperation, which is more honorific than substantive; it leaves him time to spend at a Peace Center he founded and named for himself in downtown Tel Aviv. Though even Peres was optimistic about the prospects for peace any time soon, he contended that the process contained an internal dynamic that not even the hard-line politicians—Israeli or Arab—could stop.

> The next millennium will be different. A new generation is coming to power, with totally new values. Jordan's young King Abdullah said when he met Bashar, Assad's son, that "we are both of the Internet generation." It's a cross-border outlook. It means that looking at peace in terms of military strategy, or even politics, is not enough. More important in the long term are the psychological and social components.
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> There are eight universities in the territories we occupy, with fifty thousand Palestinian students. These young people have high-tech minds, and that leads to democracy. Our generation's heritage to the next generation is a global economy. The Palestinians, after Arafat, will have the opportunity to set up the first real democratic state with a modern economy in the Arab world. And that will make a difference. We're all, Arabs and Israelis, on the same ship, and bombing each other won't make it better. The politicians need a relationship not just with nations but with the new age. The old fences between us are out-of-date.
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> The current generation, on our side as well as theirs, understands that. They all wear jeans and T-shirts and eat at McDonald's. They listen to the same music, tap into the Internet, watch the same TV, and talk to one another on cell phones. There's a sense of equality about them that's new in the world. They don't want to kill or be killed. I think our strategy—including America's strategy—should be focused on them. They may not

have an immediate impact, but there is no way they will not have an impact in the coming years. They make me hopeful.

Right or wrong, Peres has a vision, but the men who run Israel and the Arab states clearly have their eyes fixed more on old fears than new opportunities. These leaders may in due course settle up with one another, but it will not be soon, and if some of the parties feel cheated and abused, their peace will not be permanent. Even without a settlement, there may be no full-scale wars immediately, but surely some blood will be shed at the hands of aggrieved segments of the population, if not their governments. Not until peace is achieved—real peace—will these grievances start to vanish. Only then will the Middle East be able to put its mind to a shared, people-to-people agenda—education, prosperity, technology, tourism, even entertainment and sports—suitable to the third millennium.