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“The Arab-Israeli Peace Process- 1999”

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The Year in Review

For some aspects of Arab-Israeli relations and negotiations, the beginning and end of 1999 were starkly opposite. Both moved from stagnation and disdain to movement and, in some cases, even reluctant embrace. However, despite a year-end betterment in Arab-Israeli negotiations, and some improvement in bilateral Arab-Israeli relations, distinctive Arab voices were heard throughout the year opposing Israeli legitimacy and the pace of Arab normalization of relations with the Jewish state. Some constants for the year were as they were in previous years: Egypt's President Mubarak remained Arafat's single most important adviser, the dominant American role in Arab-Israeli negotiations did not change, Hizballah forces in southern Lebanon periodically poked at Israel's presence, and Jordanian-Israeli relations remained relatively stable. Israelis and their Arab negotiating counterparts continued as they had since the 1991 Madrid Middle East Peace Conference in bilateral and direct negotiating processes. No effort was made to move from implementing incremental steps to reaching for something broader, namely a comprehensive Palestinian-Israeli agreement. Likewise, no consideration was given nor discussion heard about convening a broader comprehensive negotiating approach where all Arab sides would meet with the Israelis at a major conference to resolve outstanding differences. Parochial Palestinian and Syrian territorial interests took precedence over a broader pan-Arab mechanism of negotiations with Israel. Throughout the year, peaceful Arab-Israeli relations remained an illusive objective, but the negotiating process was significantly more active on more fronts on the eve of the millennium than when 1999 began.

At the beginning of 1999, neither were public Syrian-Israeli talks under way nor were any seriously contemplated. Physically embedded in southern Lebanon since 1982, no apparent likelihood existed for an Israeli withdrawal either unilaterally or in some connection with a possible Syrian-Israeli or Lebanese-Israeli agreement. As for Jordan, while October 1999 marked the fifth anniversary of the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty, there was no fanfare on either side of the Jordan River commemorating the event. Crustiness and mistrust still characterized Israeli-

Jordanian relations. Lacking a “peace dividend,” Jordanians remained somewhat embittered, pointing frequently to the absence of economic benefits to their daily lives as a result of the treaty with Israel. Furthermore, any real change, improvement, or decline in bilateral Jordanian-Israeli relations were suspended by internal changes in both countries: King Hussein’s death, accession to rule by his son Abdullah in February, Netanyahu’s defeat in May, and Barak’s defining outline of how the Palestinian-Israeli track would unfold. Quite noticeably, however, anti-normalization pronouncements against Israel from Jordanian and other Arab professional associations increased in the second half of the year. But those statements of anger against Israel ultimately did little to change the historic pragmatic relationship between Israel and Jordan. In a broader geographic sweep, until Israel’s elections, its diplomatic relations with Arab and Moslem states languished or worsened; Arab media, both government and non-government sponsored outlets, hurled continuous volleys of invective at the Netanyahu government, primarily for its turgid pace in negotiating with the Palestinians. Three years of Netanyahu’s applied sluggishness on the Palestinian-Israeli track pained virtually every Arab politician and editorial writer.

More than any other factors, Benjamin Netanyahu’s defeat and Ehud Barak’s victory as prime minister in Israel’s 17 May 1999 elections increased the pace of Arab-Israeli talks and, at least to some degree, improved Arab-Israeli relations. Without precedent in Israeli-Syrian relations, almost immediately after Barak’s election, he and Syrian President Hafez al-Assad engaged in a series of public exchanges where each praised the other. Hopes were raised that Syrian-Israeli talks might resume after a hiatus of almost four years. And then, in mid-December, Barak met with Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara in Washington, DC, under President Clinton’s guidance, to plot out a calendar for future substantive talks. Though no formal agreement was signed between them, a promise was made at the conclusion of their several days of talks to continue discussions on 3 January 2000. Given the history of Syrian-Israeli enmity, such an initial public meeting contained hopes and expectations that a Syrian-Israeli agreement, though with difficult issues to resolve, might be consummated in the not-too-distant future. The Shara-Barak meetings were not media extravaganzas like Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 or Arafat’s public hand-shake on the White House lawn with former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in September 1993. However, the public meeting of a high-ranking Syrian official with the Israeli prime minister under the auspices of the American president was symbolically significant in its own right. With respect to Lebanon, Barak made a campaign pledge to withdraw Israeli troops from Lebanon within a year. By the end of December, Barak had instructed various branches of the IDF to plan for implementing and concluding such a contingency. On the Palestinian-Israeli track, Barak and PA President Yasir Arafat, almost immediately after the May 1999 elections, initiated a regular dialogue, as did their negotiating representatives. Whereas Arafat and Netanyahu did not meet once in 1999, Barak and Arafat met more than six times before the end of the year, either directly or at some international function or gathering.

From mid-year forward, Palestinians and Israelis at various levels frequently discussed and resolved outstanding issues between them, engaged in substantive discussions about final status issues, and adjusted timetables for definition of transitional and final status issues. The respective sides renewed bi-lateral committee talks on civilian matters -- aviation, law, trade, industry, and security -- and added a new joint committee to manage prisoner releases. In September, Barak and Arafat, under the watchful eye of Egyptian President Mubarak, Jordan's King Abdullah, and President Clinton, signed the September 1999 Sharm el-Sheikh Agreement (SSA) aimed primarily at implementing previously made Palestinian-Israeli understandings. Equally important, the SSA called for quick resumption of final status talks and established a timetable for conclusion of a framework agreement on permanent status issues (called FAPS) by 13 February 2000, while setting a deadline for completing a comprehensive final status agreement by 13 September 2000. Not all Palestinian-Israeli issues were resolved because each side still had negotiating "red lines" they would not cross, and residual rancor and mistrust muddied Palestinian-Israeli relations. Furthermore, Palestinian and Israeli voices who resisted Oslo and its inherent concept of sharing the land west of the Jordan River remained vocally adamant in their opposition. These voices did not care whether it was Netanyahu or Barak leading Israel; Oslo, to them, was flawed because it gave Israel the power and right to decide the content and pace of withdrawal and, above all, sustained the objectionable concept of sharing western Palestine with the Zionists, period. Both before and after Israel's election, Palestinian and Arab voices chided the United States for not applying enough pressure on Israel to provide more land to the PA on a faster timetable. Early in the year, the U.S. announced that it planned to play a much less active role in final status negotiations because it thought that "permanent status is not something that should be mediated."¹ Some Palestinian recognition existed that a left-of-center-led Israeli government would be more flexible in negotiations than one right-of-center, but that did not change the view of Palestinian leaders, such as Nayif Hawatimeh, who described Oslo as "unjust" because the original negotiation framework was tipped in favor of Israel due to its power and the weakness of Arab solidarity.² Yet, as compared to the first of the year, during its second half, obviously coincidental to Barak's election, prospects for progress on the Palestinian-Israeli track were free of violence, despite the slow-down in the talks, and basic disagreements were on the substantive issues of settlements, borders, refugees, and the status of Jerusalem. Israeli leaders, regardless of political stripe, developed a consensus view not to dismantle the settlements, return to the pre-June 1967 borders, repatriate all Palestinian refugees, or put portions of Jerusalem under foreign sovereignty.

With Barak's candidacy for prime minister established, and with former Israeli military leaders entering the election scene to oppose Netanyahu, a change, if not improvement, in Arab-Israeli relations was anticipated among Arabs and Israelis who wanted the negotiations to move from languishing engagement to active progress. Indeed, Barak's election saw a spike in Arab expectations that movement would return to Arab-Israeli talks on all fronts, and by the end of the year, those expectations were partially fulfilled. However, there was an unseen legacy from Netanyahu's stewardship of Arab-Israeli negotiations: Palestinian and Syrian officials translated Barak's willingness to rejuvenate negotiations as his *equal* willingness to accept Arab views on

the negotiated outcomes, which included, for example, the Arab demand for full Israeli withdrawal to the 4 June 1967 borders.

Barak's election promise to withdraw Israeli troops from Lebanon, unilaterally or otherwise, provided hope for some movement on the Syrian-Israeli and/or the Lebanese-Israeli track. Whereas Israel's bilateral ties with the two Arab states with full diplomatic treaty relations with Israel were at a nadir in January, Jerusalem's relations with Egypt and Jordan were markedly improved with Netanyahu's defeat. Egypt, for example, in late November, though some of its media and commentators agitated against normalization of relations with Israel throughout the year, conducted meetings between Mubarak and Israeli Minister of Regional Cooperation Shimon Peres to widen economic cooperation.³ Before the year's end, they decided to sign an agreement to sell natural gas to Israel.

After the watershed Israeli election, Arab and Moslem states not contiguous to Israel blunted some of their sharpest public antagonism toward Israel and moved to improve bilateral relations. Such improvements in tones were slight; they emerged not from a change in ideological conviction, but out of a readiness to accept understandings which the PLO and the PA considered noteworthy. Multilateral talks on issues of arms control, water, refugees, the environment, and economic development continued to be virtually motionless during Netanyahu's tenure as prime minister, though the refugee working group met in Paris on 20 March. During the second half of the year, though multilateral talks did not recommence, there was serious discussion about resurrecting them.

Throughout the year, the three most involved outside parties -- the United States, EU, and Egypt -- showed regular interest in promoting movement in negotiations. Each was frustrated and angry at the lack of progress at the year's outset; each, at the end of the year, was more active and positive in outlook. During the first half of the year, Washington listened arduously and frequently to the frustrations articulated by both sides of the other. Throughout the year, Washington offered its mediation and good offices in seeing the WRM implemented but stayed clear of being involved in discussion of final status issues. Noticeably after the Israeli elections, the White House and State Department took a more pro-active role in rejuvenating the Wye timetable as demonstrated by President Clinton's more frequent contacts with Barak and Arafat in person, on the phone, and through American mediators. The September SSA did not demonstrate renewed American mediation -- that agreement was essentially hammered out by Arafat, Barak, and their respective advisors -- but signaled again that Washington needed to be the "witness and guarantor" of Israeli-Palestinian understandings. When the year started, the European Union was angry, if not hostile, with Israel. The EU Council of Ministers declared on 25 January that it deplored Israel's continued suspension of Wye implementation and believed that Israel was contravening the spirit and letter of the memorandum.⁴ By comparison, at the end of the year, the EU, though still disdainful of Israel's settlement construction, talked seriously

about twining Israeli and Palestinian cities to encourage development in the PA areas and stimulate regional cooperation.⁵ When the new millennium started, a measure of goodwill, encouragement, and progress characterized the Arab-Israeli negotiating process. A year's time and a change in Israel's prime minister made the difference between January and December. Egyptian President Mubarak continued to be Arafat's leading Arab counsel; throughout the year, they met in person no less than fourteen times. These meetings and the initiative to shelve the idea of convoking a possible Arab summit meeting because final status talks moved forward by year's end assured Cairo of its special Arab state advisory role to the PA.

Where Netanyahu was a nay-sayer about concessions to the Arab side, Prime Minister Barak verbalized and initiated a distinctive readiness to move the process forward. After his election, Syrians, Palestinians, Lebanese, and other watchful Arab eyes waited to see what Barak would offer, over what period of time, and what he would demand or require in return. While most Arabs expressed either pleasure or caution about Barak's rapid jump-starting of the negotiating process, none were ready to accept any of Barak's red-lines, which he presented in July. Perhaps, Barak's words and actions in affecting diplomatic movement were over appreciated and too enthusiastically welcomed by Palestinian and Syrian officials in particular, because they were seen in comparison to the inaction and disputatious Arab-Israeli atmosphere that characterized Netanyahu's tenure. As Palestinians and Syrians increasingly probed Barak, they found him ready to negotiate and compromise on a wide variety of issues, but not ready to accept their respective negotiating positions. Arab expectations for change in Israel's negotiating tones and substance were legitimate, but their *a priori* assumptions that Barak would rubber-stamp their negotiating views was unrealistic and therefore was met by eventual disappointment and criticism. By the end of the year, while substantive progress could be seen on all negotiating tracks, Palestinian and Israeli negotiators still faced the most difficult and complicated items on the negotiating table.

Nineteen ninety-nine witnessed no major confrontations between Israelis and Palestinians and only a minuscule number of violent incidents; on the Israeli-Lebanese border, however, exchanges of fire were sporadic with a major outburst of violence in the spring. While a new era of trust was not yet born, nor even in sight, the protracted listlessness of Arab-Israeli negotiations that typified the first part of the year was history at year's end, and was replaced by clarification of views and movement. When 1999 ended, all parties interested in diplomatic progress were pleased, in relative terms, that substantive diplomatic progress ensued. At the beginning of the new millennium, progress in Arab-Israeli negotiations looked promising on the Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian tracks.

Waiting for Israel's Elections

When 1998 ended, the Arab-Israeli peace process was barely a negotiating process; it was

moribund. Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Musa described its state of affairs in January 1999 as “abysmal.”⁶ Rancor, distance, frustration, and impatience characterized general Arab attitudes toward Israel. In January, Syria’s official government newspaper, *Tishrin*, characterized the Netanyahu government as “tilting toward extremism, radicalism, and ethnic fanaticism, not capable of making peace.”⁷ The chief editor of MENA in Cairo, Mahfuz al-Ansari, described Netanyahu as “a racist person...the most dangerous to administer the affairs of the Hebrew state.”⁸ The Arab media and politicians almost always based their criticism against Netanyahu for what he had not fulfilled in association with the negotiating process. Summarizing that view, Cairo commentator Makram Muhammad Ahmad said, “Netanyahu does not want peace for Israel; he wants Arab territory. He is committed, right down to his bone marrow, to the expansionist policies that seek to realize the Torah promise of a Greater Israel. His reelection will be a big catastrophe for the future of regional peace and stability because it will only cause more killing, blood, destruction, and violence. The Arab experience with Binyamin Netanyahu proves that he keeps no promise, honors no agreement.”⁹

The underpinning irony requiring Netanyahu’s December 1998 call for new elections came from partners in his own ruling coalition. They had supported Netanyahu in the 1996 election because he staunchly defended retention of the territories under Israeli control, spoke for the rights of the settlers in the Judea, Samaria, and Gaza Strip settlements, and remained openly critical of the Oslo process. Though he had signed the 1997 Hebron agreement, which suggested sharing Hebron with the Palestinians, Netanyahu never hid his dislike for the PA or his distrust for Arafat. After returning from the Wye River summit talks, his coalition partners -- to whom he had promised no further withdrawal from the territories -- abandoned him for being too forthcoming at Wye. Abu-Mazin, the number two in the PA and the PLO, concurred; he believed that the “implementation of the WRM...brought the downfall of the Netanyahu government.”¹⁰ Rather than face a no-confidence motion in the Israeli Parliament where new elections would have been forced upon him within sixty days, Netanyahu, at the end of December, called for new elections to be held on 17 May 1999. The date was twelve days after Arafat had publicly promised that he would declare a Palestinian state unilaterally. Arafat, in response to the Israeli election timetable, backed down from his threat to declare the Palestinian state, noting that it would only provide “political ammunition” to Netanyahu.¹¹ Arafat was fed-up with Netanyahu and hoped for a change in the Israeli government. Unlike the run-up to the May 1996 elections, where four terrorist attacks significantly influenced a sufficient number of Israeli voters to cast their ballots for someone perceived to be “tougher” on Arafat than Shimon Peres, the Labor Party candidate at the time, no terrorist attacks were perpetrated against Israelis prior to the May 1999 elections. The absence of such violent attacks indicated that Arafat and other Palestinian leaders possessed direct control over *all* elements of the Palestinian community, especially those who vehemently and violently opposed both the Oslo process and dropping the “armed struggle” against Israel.

As for Netanyahu, personally, he still possessed a combination of distrust for Yasir Arafat and Palestinian national objectives and basic opposition to the Oslo process. Netanyahu opposed granting prerogatives to the PA, fulfilling previously written commitments with them, and returning territories in the West Bank held by Israel since the June 1967 War. When the year started, Netanyahu claimed that he was “not to blame for the suspension of the negotiations;”¹² it was the Palestinians, he said, who did not implement their share of the WRM. Many disagreed. Typical was the EU, stating on 25 January that it “deplored” the Israeli Government’s suspension of the implementation of the WRM.¹³ For their part, many Israeli politicians who had served with Netanyahu in either civilian capacities or in senior military posts distanced themselves from him, resigned from his Likud Party, or established new political parties to oppose and run against the increasingly embattled prime minister. Former IDF Chief of Staff Amnon Shahaq, in announcing his candidacy for prime minister, typified the building sentiment against Netanyahu when he said that he was “dangerous to Israel; Netanyahu has to go.”¹⁴ For their criticism of Netanyahu, the Israeli media tended to focus not so much on his slow pace in negotiating with the PA, but on his personality and autocratic style of governance. The day before the national elections, *Haaretz* characterized Netanyahu’s traits of character as “extraordinary in their destructiveness...a prime minister unique in the harmful influence he exerted on public life.”¹⁵

Suspended, the Arab-Israeli peace process waited for the outcome of the upcoming elections. After the announcement of Israeli elections at the end of 1998, Arab commentators and politicians accused Netanyahu of “exploiting” the election campaign to avoid implementing the Wye agreements.¹⁶ Conclusion of “Final Status” talks by 4 May 1999, as called for in the 1995 Oslo II agreement, were on indefinite hold. Mutually agreed upon Palestinian-Israeli commitments made under American guidance at the Wye River summit talks in October 1998 were, for the most part, postponed. If tortuously implemented, obligations were undertaken with evasive intent and always with a spirit of lamenting reluctance.

Specifically, Israel’s election campaign defined positions and clarified policy differences between the two major candidates on negotiating issues with the Palestinians. Netanyahu noted that he did “not believe a sovereign Palestinian state [was] a historic imperative,”¹⁷ and that if Arafat “declared the establishment of a state unilaterally, it [would] mean the annulment of the Oslo accords.”¹⁸ Said Barak, a Palestinian state “is not our concern...Why should we be for or against a Palestinian state? A Palestinian state is not an Israeli goal.”¹⁹ On final status issues, Netanyahu was more reluctant to make compromises with the Palestinians. He said, “If peace is to prevail, the Palestinians must not have a large army equipped with tanks, missiles, and artillery, a contiguous border with Jordan, and the capacity to form alliances with such regimes as Iraq and Iran. Israel cannot relinquish control over air space, strategic areas, and vital water resources, and [it] must retain security supervision over seaports and airports.”²⁰ On Jerusalem, Netanyahu said that not only would there be no concession on Jerusalem, it was “not a subject for negotiation, never the capital of any other nation, and Israel’s undivided capital.”²¹ As for Barak, he reiterated similar positions held by his predecessor and mentor, Yitzhak Rabin. Barak said that there “must be physical separation from the Palestinians, with us being here and them

being there, in accordance with four security red lines...We need peace and separation on the ground. Jerusalem will remain united under Israel's sovereignty forever. Second, there will be no return to the 1967 borders on any account. Third, there will be no foreign army west of the Jordan River. Fourth, most of the Israeli settlers in Judea and Samaria will be clustered in large settlement blocs."²²

The Palestinian-Israeli Track Before Israeli Elections

The October 1998 WRM contained a series of specific timetables connected to obligation fulfillment of issues previously and newly negotiated. The primary issue pertained to Israel's next scheduled redeployment and included a strong U.S. desire for both sides to refrain from taking unilateral actions during the various transitional phases leading to and completion of final status talks. Because of Palestinian insistence, the Wye talks also included discussion about the establishment and opening of the Palestinian port in Gaza and Israeli release of Palestinian prisoners. The PA airport in Gaza was opened at the end of November 1998.

For the PA, a key issue was redeployment or withdrawal of Israeli forces and the transfer of land to PA control. After the completion of the first stage of redeployment in November 1998 -- its implementation containing rancor, bad will, and delay -- the total land under the PA's control, either partially or fully, was approximately 920 square miles or about the area of the five boroughs of New York City.²³ The second stage of this deployment was to be completed by 16 February 1999, but none took place. In an effort to meet the Wye obligations on confiscation of illegal weapons, some arms were collected in late 1998. Although a U.S. Justice Department team helped the PA in January to create a system to collect, register, and destroy weapons, including heavy machine guns, hand grenades, and some mortars, the confiscation process stopped in late winter. Under Wye, the PA agreed to reduce the size of its police force to the amounts stipulated in the Oslo II Agreement (1995), which meant laying off as many as 10,000 policemen -- less than the requisite number were let go by the PA. On 25 January, Israel and the PA extended the mandate of the 100-plus members of the international observer force in Hebron. In early February, some 50 Israelis and Palestinians in the subcommittees established under the Oslo Accords and WRM met in Ramallah and discussed matters dealing with topics such as environment, electricity, water, communications, and transportation. Specific issues that moved forward in discussions included Israel's commitment to lay 5 central water pipes in the West Bank to be linked to some 50 Palestinian villages, Israeli approval for the drilling of 16 water wells, and a postal agreement aimed at expediting and improving service.²⁴ By the end of February, however, virtually all the Wye committees set up to implement its various timetables, except those necessary to maintain security cooperation, ceased to meet until after Israel's May elections. The only other committee that met through the Israeli elections was the Israeli-PA-U.S. anti-incitement committee formed at Wye and aimed at eliminating negative stereotypes in textbooks and sensitizing Israeli and Palestinian journalists to the adverse consequences of using incendiary phrases and vocabulary.

Typical of the miscommunication between the sides was the committee's inability to reach a mutually agreeable definition of "incitement."²⁵

A vignette, representative of two opposing Israeli views about negotiations with the Palestinians and the Oslo process, and an alteration in radical Palestinian views about Israel took place at King Hussein's funeral. With dignitaries assembled to honor Hussein's life and memory, Israeli President Ezer Weizman willingly shook hands with Nayef Hawatimeh, the Syrian-based leader of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). Hawatimeh, the master-mind of an attack in 1974 that killed 20 Israeli school children at Maalot in northern Israel and staunchly opposed for his entire life to Israel's very existence, nonetheless, was interviewed on Israeli radio. Netanyahu, also at the funeral with Israeli Foreign Minister Sharon, denounced Weizman's handshake, saying that Israelis "should talk to those who want us on earth rather than buried beneath it," to which Weizman replied, "True, Hawatimeh murdered, but he was willing to extend a hand and to speak to me...It is not a pleasure to speak with him...but through him it is possible to arrive at all kinds of things."²⁶

For his part, Arafat was not yet interested in reaching a final agreement with Israel; he was interested in having more land returned to Palestinian control in the shortest possible time frame. He was interested in an Israeli leader who would, in his view, accept *all* Palestinian positions on final status issues. A change in the Israeli government, from his view, strongly offered that prospect. In seeking to weaken Netanyahu and perhaps enhance Barak's election, Arafat made what seemed to be pragmatic, if not systematic, political decisions that would facilitate weakening Netanyahu's candidacy in the eyes of undecided, centrist, and right wing Israeli voters. Though the PA, to its own satisfaction, had amended its Charter in 1996, it went through the motions again in December 1998 of amending articles in the Charter that were objectionable to Israel. In a meeting in Gaza of Palestinian notables with President Clinton, the PA affirmed the previous changes "in order to deny Netanyahu any opportunity or excuse for avoiding implementation of the [Wye] agreement."²⁷ On the highly emotional and contentious issue of Israeli settlement expansion, Arafat and the PA were exceptionally unperturbed in their comment during the spring election campaign, leaving opposition to such Israeli actions primarily to the Palestinian media. Noted one of Israel's leading commentators of Palestinian affairs, Dani Rubenstein, at the end of February, the "Palestinians are quiet now [on the settlement issue]...because the Palestinian leadership has concluded that a violent outburst would only help Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose entire reelection campaign is based on nurturing Israelis' fear of Arabs."²⁸ Arafat also realized political distance between Clinton and Netanyahu could and did enhance Clinton's readiness to work closer with the PA president. Said *Maariv* in April, "The problem facing Netanyahu is that he has led U.S-Israeli relations to an unprecedented low and Washington-Arafat relations to an incredible blossoming."²⁹ A reduction in incendiary language coming from PA officialdom toward Israel and diminished physical violence against Israelis prevented Netanyahu from stock-piling ammunition as Israel's champion of Israeli security. As

Israel's most decorated soldier, Barak was able to retain that undiminished appellation from the Israeli voter throughout the election campaign. Arafat's policy choices aided Barak's candidacy. How much of that strategy was orchestrated by interests outside of Israel -- including those in Europe, the Arab world, and America who were collectively determined to rid the country of Netanyahu's leadership -- remains unclear.

Throughout 1998 and early 1999, the date preferred for the Palestinian state's declaration was 4 May 1999; it was the official date set for the conclusion of the transitional and final phase negotiations. According to Abu-Mazin, the Palestinian aspiration was to have that date "crowned with the declaration of the Palestinian state." Many Palestinian leaders and Arab officials weighed in on the importance of declaring the state. Both Marwan al-Barghuthi, the secretary of Arafat's ruling Fateh Party in the West Bank region and a major leader of the Palestinian uprising against Israel a year later, and Qays 'Abd al-Karim, a member of Hawatimeh's DFLP, adamantly endorsed the declaration of the state on the date the interim period ended (4 May 1999), fearing that failure to do so would "consecrate the status quo as the shape of the final settlement."³⁰ Ultimately, Arafat and the Palestinian leadership refrained from unilaterally declaring an independent Palestinian state. In a March released poll conducted by the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Studies at Tel Aviv University, among potential Jewish Israeli voters, 56 percent believed that a unilateral state declaration would effect the outcome of the May elections, and among those, 80 percent believed it would strengthen the Israeli parties of the right.³¹ Arafat had additional considerations. He understood that a mere verbal declaration would not change on the ground either the inadequate dimensions of the state or the prerogatives he and the PA wanted. It might be a Palestinian state, but certainly, with its ties to Israel, not an independent one -- politically or economically. Outstanding unsettled issues included the largely non-contiguous nature of the areas under PA administration, the poor economic foundations of a state-in-the-making, a not-yet-defined economic aid package from foreign sources for the new state, and the extraordinarily sensitive and undecided Palestinian Arab refugee issue, or the "right-of-return." Moreover, there was no specified agreement on Arab-Moslem rights, privileges, and control of eastern Jerusalem and Arab sections of Jerusalem's Old City, which was demanded as part of the Palestinian state's future capital. Other unfinished negotiating issues included the future of the Israeli settlements and the settlers, definition of the Palestinian state's borders, as yet non-establishment of the physical connection between Gaza and the West Bank, and non-completion of Palestinian prisoner release.

There were other liabilities attached to a unilateral declaration of statehood: it would have left the undesired impression that the Palestinian conflict with Israel had been resolved satisfactorily; it would have opened the prospect for Israel declaring unilaterally fulfillment of its own objectives, such as annexing disputed territories to Israel, suspension of collected tax revenue to the PA, closure of Israel's 1967 borders to some 100,000-plus Palestinian workers, and even concern, as suggested by Bassam Abu Sharaf, a long-time confidant of Arafat, that Israel might use the

unilateral declaration of statehood as a pretext to take “intransigent” action, including an “Israeli attempt to return to the Palestinian towns”³² vacated prior to the January 1996 Palestinian presidential and legislative council elections. The opinion from the Clinton administration and EU countries also mattered to Arafat. It was argued that Arafat could, in exchange for not declaring the state unilaterally, obtain American, European, and other international commitments to support the state’s declaration at some future time. Said Sharaf quite candidly, “Arafat is trying to make this international support and pledge [for a Palestinian state] a price for postponing the declaration of the Palestinian state.”³³ In previous Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, the American-held view was to oppose all unilateral actions, which included Israel’s establishment or expansion of settlements, as well as the Palestinian state’s declaration. It is not clear whether there was direct linkage or not between the state’s postponed declaration and EU endorsement of the Palestinian state; but on 25 March at the end of the EU’s Berlin summit, the fifteen European countries in their final communique supported “the Palestinians’ permanent and unrestricted right to selfdetermination, including the possibility of a state,” and called for “the prompt fulfillment of that right,” which “is not subject to veto.” The EU countries pronounced themselves willing to “envisage recognizing a Palestinian state once the time comes.”³⁴ The EU called for an early resumption of final status negotiations and called upon the parties to “refrain from activities which prejudice the outcome of final status negotiations,” including settlement activity, incitement, and violence.³⁵ Arab gratitude for declaratory EU support for the Palestinian state was prominently noted.³⁶

Thus, throughout the spring, prospects for the state’s declaration were debated almost daily by Arab and Israeli politicians and by the Arab, Israeli, and world media. In March, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives approved concurrent resolutions calling on President Clinton not to recognize a unilaterally declared Palestinian state. At the same time, due to the halt in Wye implementation, the Congress decided against fast-tracking the Wye supplemental aid package, which would have given to Israel \$1.2 billion to cover redeployment costs and \$400 million to the PA in donor assistance.³⁷ On 26 April, Clinton reflected the sense of the Congress and the EU’s March Berlin statement in his own public statement and private letter. Both were issued the day before the Palestinian Central Council (PCC) was set to debate the declaration issue in Gaza. Clinton said that the U.S. supported “the aspirations of the Palestinian people to determine their own future on their own land...Palestinians and Israelis must avoid unilateral acts and declarations that prejudice or predetermine issues reserved for permanent status negotiations.”³⁸ Clinton stipulated that the U.S. would convene a new set of peace talks within six months after the Israeli elections and hoped that the final status talks would be completed within one year. Advocating movement and stipulating a timetable for progress was an obvious American endorsement of Barak’s views and, therefore, his candidacy for prime minister. Clinton, for his part, prior to the Israeli elections, refused to meet Netanyahu, with the Israeli prime minister quoted as saying that he was not going “to stand in line” for a meeting with Clinton.³⁹ On 27 April, Arafat recommended that the PCC oppose the unilateral statehood declaration, which it did. Arafat reportedly said that “we don’t need to affirm our state because we are actually exercising

statehood.”⁴⁰

By postponing the state’s declaration, Arafat won international plaudits and a series of promises for future endorsement and support of the state-to-be, but inevitably disappointed many Palestinians and other Arabs, who regularly criticized him for what was seen by many as caving into American wishes. Conjecture might have one believe that it was never Arafat’s intention to declare the state, but to use the threat as political bludgeon to extract concessions from Israel and others. If he sensed that he could and would never compromise on full Israeli withdrawal, Arab control over east Jerusalem, and the Palestinian “right of return,” then the diplomatic “game” he played was masterful and highly successful.

In a poll among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza carried out ten days before the PCC decision, 48 percent supported waiting to declare a state until there was an agreement with Israel, while 42 percent supported establishing the state when the transitional period ended in early May, even if no agreement with Israel was signed by that date.⁴¹ Very little notice was taken in Israel or among the Palestinians about the close of the five-year Oslo interim period on 4 May. It is noteworthy that in the months prior to the election, and in fact as early as December 1994, two-thirds of the Israeli Jewish public believed that the “peace process” would “ultimately lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state and that whatever government arises from the coming elections will arrive at a permanent settlement which will include withdrawal from territories and recognition of such a state.”⁴² In other words, by the time the May 1999 elections were held, a vast majority of Israelis had internalized the eventual reality of a Palestinian state’s establishment; however, the devil remained in the details: its dimensions, prerogatives, and whether it would emerge eventually from some unilateral act or through negotiations.

Transforming the Negotiating Environment and Arab-Israeli Relations: Barak Style

Barak perceived his victory of 56.1% of the vote as a mandate for his candidacy and positions, with little stock taken that perhaps many who voted for him *really* voted against Netanyahu. On 17 May, the same day as his victory, Barak outlined his negotiating positions with the Palestinians. He promised to put any final status agreement to the Israeli public in the form of a national referendum. He indicated his negotiating red lines: “No concessions on Israeli sovereignty over a unified Jerusalem, no “foreign” army west of the Jordan River, no evacuation of major Jewish settlement blocs, and no return to the June 1967 borders.” In Washington, Jordan’s King Abdullah met with Clinton and congressional leaders, where he noted his pleasure with Barak’s election.⁴³ Almost simultaneously in Washington, AIPAC, Israel’s most powerful lobbying voice in Washington, reversed its historical opposition to a Palestinian state. Taken during its 40th annual conference, AIPAC said it took such action “to comport with a more mainstream position and promote consonance with Israeli leaders’ stance on this issue, noting that the Labor Party no longer opposed a Palestinian state and Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon accepted

its inevitability.”⁴⁴

Barak spent six weeks forming a coalition government. Between his election and actually being sworn in as Israel’s prime minister on 6 July, Israel’s relations with the Arab states and the Palestinians continued to be strained; the lame duck Netanyahu government expanded settlement areas around Jerusalem, established settlement enclaves in contested areas around Jerusalem, including Ras al-Amud/Jabal Abu Ghunaym, known as Har Homa, and retaliated against a Hizballah katusha attack against northern Israeli settlements by hitting back hard militarily on 24 June, the largest attack on Lebanon since Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996,⁴⁵ causing a black-out on Beirut due to Israel’s attack on a power plant.⁴⁶ With respect to Lebanon, Barak repeated his campaign pledge on 20 May to withdraw Israeli troops within a year.⁴⁷ At this juncture, Barak’s public thinking tied preparation, negotiation, and withdrawal to resumption of the Syrian-Israeli talks, not to a unilateral withdrawal. However, on 3 June, Israel, still while Netanyahu was prime minister, had its client militia, the South Lebanon Army, withdraw unilaterally from an area north of Israel’s declared security zone. The Israeli-sponsored partial SLA withdrawal was undertaken without any security guarantees provided by the Lebanese government.⁴⁸ A distinction was clearly visible in Israel’s evolving strategic policy toward Lebanon: Israel wanted to withdraw its troops from Lebanon but would, before or after, punish anyone who engaged in acts that threatened Israeli security.

Once the Israeli election results were tallied, Arab political leadership and Arab media expository attention focused intensely on what Barak would do. Most Arab writers and leaders were cautiously optimistic, while a minority suggested that no difference existed in Israeli views regardless of its prime minister -- all were expansionistic, aggressive, and arrogant. Still others counseled patience in prejudging Barak. Arab governmental and private media were virtually uniform in expressing unrestrained pleasure that Netanyahu was gone. And there were several statements of Arab praise for Israel’s democratic way of changing governments. Egyptian columnist Salamah Ahmad Salamah was delighted, noting that Netanyahu’s departure “removed one of the most hated Israeli personalities in the history of the Jewish state,” while “opening an opportunity for a breakthrough” in negotiations.⁴⁹ London’s *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, under the title “Barak’s Israel,” called Netanyahu’s defeat the end of a “nightmare.”⁵⁰ Mahmud ‘Abbas, considered to be the second ranking leader in the PA, said that Barak’s election “created conditions for the resumption of the final status talks alongside the implementation of the interim phase agreements.”⁵¹ A PNC member offered a more tepid view, stating that while Israelis affirmed their preference in favor of peace, a Netanyahu victory would have continued “the enormous political gains on both international and Arab levels...even the United States, Israel’s major ally, became sympathetic with the Palestinian position.”⁵²

An analysis by a writer in the government-controlled Syrian press claimed that Netanyahu lost rather than Barak winning, that “there are no major differences among the rulers of Israel from

any party, shape, or color...,” and what needs to change in Israel regardless of who is in power is the “expansionist, racist, and aggressive” policies of all Israeli leaders,⁵³ and, of course, renew what the Syrians believed to be Rabin’s pledge to withdraw to the lines of 4 June 1967. Jordan’s *al-Dustur* editorially noted hopefully “on opening a new chapter in the region.”⁵⁴ Egypt’s President Mubarak and his political advisor, Usamah al-Baz, in separate statements, said that Egypt should “wait and see” and “not prejudge” the new Israeli prime minister. Both hoped that past agreements with the Palestinians would be implemented prior to initiating final status negotiations and that talks with Syria would resume where they left off, the Egyptian and Syrian euphemism for the so-called Rabin promise to return to the 4 June 1967 lines.⁵⁵ Among Palestinians, there was another view expressed, not one of praise for Barak’s victory but of “admiration” for the Israeli political system. Compliments were offered for the exercise of the majority’s free will, with comparisons made to Palestinian politics where “factions, parties, and forces are self-installed...our Palestinian people are thirsty for the exercise of the freedom of choice.”⁵⁶ While exhilaration about Netanyahu’s defeat was expressed and speculation about the contents and pace of future negotiations amply debated, there was little awareness that renewed negotiations might require possible mutual compromises on crucial issues, if the coming negotiations were truly “give and take.” Arab quarters, particularly, were not sure about Barak’s readiness to consent to desired Palestinian or Syrian Arab outcomes in negotiations: *total* Israeli withdrawal from *all* the territories taken in the June 1967 War, the right of return of Palestinian refugees to pre-1967 Israel, and the establishment of a Palestinian Arab state with Jerusalem as its capital. No effort was made to prepare domestic constituencies for eventual agreements with Israel because the Syrian and Palestinian views, as they became clearer by the end of the year, were focused on the unalterable Arab requirement that Israel accept the totality of the Arab view of the negotiated outcome. A consensus Israeli view about Barak’s stewardship of the negotiating process emerged. Typical was the view expressed by a titled editorial in *Haaretz*, “Barak Administration to Rebuild Confidence and Enable Substantial Progress.”⁵⁷ *Hatzofe*, the paper of the Israeli mainstream religious party, noted that even those who voted against him should “lend him a hand,” because Barak “had created for himself a wide public coalition.”⁵⁸

The Sharm el-Sheikh Agreement (SSA)

On 11 July, five days after having his coalition government confirmed by the Israeli Parliament, Barak met with Arafat at the Erez Crossing, the first Israeli-PA summit in seven months. Four days later, Barak met with Clinton in the first of two meetings while on his maiden trip to Washington. At the second major occasion for funeral diplomacy of the year, Arafat, Barak, Clinton, Assad, and Abdullah met on 25 July to pay respects at the passing of Morocco’s King Hassan II. Then on 27 July, Barak and Arafat met again. Barak tried to allay Arafat’s fears that Israel would place Syrian-Israeli talks ahead of Wye implementation or discussion of final status talks.⁵⁹ Barak then met with Mubarak in an effort to have the Egyptian president persuade Arafat to consent to Barak’s delay in implementing the next withdrawal as specified in the WRM.⁶⁰

In August, Israeli and Palestinian negotiating teams held almost daily meetings in Israel,

Washington, and Palestinian areas on a timetable for implementation of agreements made in the 1998 WRM. Agreements were reached on initial construction of the Gaza port and opening a southern safe passage route between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; however, impasses occurred over the number of Palestinian prisoners to be released and over the timetable and areas from which Israel would withdraw as part of committed redeployments. At the end of August, Egyptian President Mubarak entered the negotiations in an intermediary role, at a time when Barak asked Washington to allow Israel and the PA to negotiate with less American intervention. With that in mind, Barak asked Secretary of State Albright to delay until the end of August her trip to the region, which she did. Then in early September, she shuttled between Arafat, Barak, and Mubarak seeking to reach a final agreement; however, by then, most of the “heavy lifting” in the negotiations had been made by the Palestinians and Israelis themselves. The pace of August’s negotiations was a far cry from the immobility which characterized talks six months earlier.

Signed on 4 September and witnessed by Secretary of State Albright, Mubarak, and Abdullah, SSA basically reaffirmed previously negotiated Palestinian and Israeli commitments, created a timetable for their implementation, raised some new issues, and stipulated the establishment of a final status talk framework by 13 February 2000. Ten of the eleven articles in the SSA either repeated language from past agreements or tinkered with their stillunimplemented obligations.

For the Palestinians, the SSA attached specific dates to past Israeli promises to open a key market street in Hebron, inaugurate a land passage between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and permit the construction of a Gaza seaport. As for the Israelis, SSA provided them two extra months to complete withdrawals envisioned in the 1998 WRM and permitted them to devise a plan to insure Palestinian acquisition of contiguous territory while Israel retained the strategic Judean Desert. Also, the SSA highlighted direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with less U.S. engagement. None of the stipulations in the SSA altered the total amount of West Bank land 40 percent to be under full or partial Palestinian control by the end of this stage, set for February 2000. Some of the clauses in the SSA showed “subtle concessions” by Israel.⁶¹ For the first time, it affirmed in writing an oral Israeli promise to release Palestinian “security prisoners,” not convicted felons as released by Netanyahu after Wye in late 1998. At Wye, Israel had managed to retain linkage between its territorial withdrawals and specific Palestinian obligations, such as confiscating illegal weapons or amending the PLO Charter. Israeli negotiators agreed to specific dates for further withdrawals, without direct linkage to outstanding Palestinian obligations. In an important shift favoring Israeli negotiating views, the SSA committed Israel to a specific date by which “permanent status negotiations” must end, namely 13 September 2000. Previously, the end of the negotiating calendar remained intentionally ambiguous, in order to avoid giving to the Palestinian side a trigger date for a unilateral declaration of independence, so opposed by Israel, Clinton, and the European Union.

In comparing the withdrawal specifics in the SSA with the 1998 WRM, Israel was to withdraw from 13% of the West Bank in three stages over a period of three months. Since there had already

been a 2% withdrawal, this left 11%. Some 3% of the remaining pullback was to take place in the Judean Desert, and that area was to be a nature reserve with no building allowed. By the Sharm agreement, Israel was to hand over the remaining 11% in three stages, instead of in two. The first took place a week after the agreement was signed, the second by 15 November and the third by 20 January 2001. None of the Judean Desert nature reserve and the areas given back were more contiguous.⁶²

With respect to prisoner release, according to Wye, Israel was to release 750 prisoners. Two hundred and fifty had already been released, leaving 500 to go. Of those remaining, the Barak government was talking about releasing 102 security prisoners; however, in the agreement, Israel promised to release 350 security prisoners in two phases. About 199 were released on 9 September and 151 on 15 October, just after the commencement of Ramadan. Among those Palestinian prisoners released by Israel in October, Hamas and Islamic Jihad members were included. The two sides agreed to talk in December about an additional release, but no numbers were suggested.

As for the building of the Gaza port, the WRM established a committee to discuss it; in the SSA, planning for the port was to begin immediately, while actual building, with certain security restrictions, did not start as was intended for October. Disagreements between Israel and the PA evolved on the truck route to be used for the transport of construction materials for the port. On the matter of safe passage, the southern route from Gaza's Erez Crossing to Tarkumia (adjacent to Hebron) was supposed to open in October pending a protocol agreement, and negotiations were to continue on the northern route (Gaza/Ramallah area). On 5 October, Israel and the PA signed an agreement opening the southern safe passage route running the 28-mile distance. The route used existing Israeli roads until a special road, bridge, or tunnel could be built. Due to disagreements about the issuance of travel permits, the safe passage did not begin operation until 25 October. The process for using the safe passage outlined in the early October agreement applied to the southern and northern route which was to open in 2000. Procedures included Palestinian application to the PA for magnetic cards that gave them one year's access to the route, with Israel retaining the right to reject any applicant. The 130,000 Palestinians who worked in Israel automatically qualified to receive cards. Palestinians used their own cars, with the route open ten hours a day, seven days a week. While Israel said it would not "trap" wanted Palestinians on the "safe passage" route, it did not renounce its prerogative to arrest Palestinians on the route.⁶³ As for Hebron, while Wye did not mention it, but the January 1997 Hebron agreement did, Hebron's main Shuhada Street was to be reopened in two stages, but was not open by the end of the year. A portion of it was open to movement prior to the SSA, but full traffic did not pass along the street by the end of the year; likewise, the promised opening of the Hasbahe, the main Arab wholesale market, did not take place on the first day of November as promised. Sharing a city important to both Palestinians and Israelis foreshadowed the difficulties of final status arrangements for Jerusalem.

While Wye did not contain a specific target date for concluding talks on a permanent peace accord, the SSA noted that within five or six months the two sides should negotiate the outline of a final status agreement, and by 13 September 2000, the accord would be concluded. In the meantime, no unilateral steps (establishment or expansion of settlements or unilateral Palestinian declaration of statehood) were to be taken during this time.⁶⁴

In Israel, there was general uniformity in the acceptance of the agreement; however, in Palestinian and Arab quarters, there was reaction that ranged from skepticism to open opposition. Unlike the domestic coalition unrest generated by the WRM a year earlier, there was no domestic earthquake from the Israeli Cabinet unrest or parliamentary instability which emerged from the SSA. By a vote of 22-2, the Israeli cabinet approved the agreement and the Israeli Parliament by a 54-23 margin.⁶⁵ The most vigorous Arab opponents of the SSA were writers in the pan-Arab press. By contrast, while many Palestinian politicians and analysts disliked the SSA, those in daily physical or geographic proximity to the territories, though certainly not thrilled by the SSA, were not as condemnatory of it. Writing in the pan-Arab *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 'Atwan 'Abd-al-Bari remorsefully claimed that Barak had scored a brilliant success against the Palestinians, one that would cause the "doors of Arab normalization that were almost closed during the past three years [to] be opened very wide."⁶⁶ Anis al-Qasem, in castigating Arafat and the agreement in the pan-Arab *al-Hayat*, accused Arafat of surrendering Palestinian legal and historic rights and postponing statehood in order to protect his own leadership position.⁶⁷ Though categorizing all Palestinian-Israeli agreements since Oslo as flawed, including the SSA, Jihad Khazen suggested in *al-Hayat* that, by comparison, the agreements "are much better than the death and despair sown by the rejectionists."⁶⁸ One Palestinian writer, Ashraf al-'Ajrami, questioned why the Palestinians were paying "the price for a commodity we already bought before."⁶⁹ By contrast and more supportive, Mubarak's political advisor, Usamah al-Baz, argued that "Palestinian gains far exceeded concessions in the SSA" and insisting on the "projected Palestinian state was out of question in the agreement" because the time was not ripe to tackle it.⁷⁰ Looking into the near future in negotiations, Palestinian writer, Mamduh Nawfal, sensed that the SSA "pulled the door wide open to the battle of the final solution that will be hard and very long."⁷¹ After the SSA was signed, namely the interim issues were tackled and implemented to some degree or other, the focus shifted to final status talks. On 13 September, the sixth anniversary of the Oslo Accord, Israel and the PA held a ceremony at the Erez Crossing which symbolically opened final status talks. Secretly on 16 September, Barak met with Arafat, after the meeting was leaked, Barak proposed that they have regular private meetings to monitor final status talks.

For the remainder of the year, Barak, with increasing frequency, articulated in public his outlines for what an agreement with the Palestinians might look like. While he became more specific about many aspects of the negotiations, and as the committees or groups discussing final status talks had more meetings, Arafat and the PA leadership was strictly circumspect. They made no public remarks about their outlines for the negotiations or stipulated a vision for the future

relationship between Israel and a Palestinian state which could be construed as an alteration of their “absolutist” negotiating position. For example, neither did Arafat nor high-ranking members of the PA leadership deviate in any way about not insisting on securing an Israeli withdrawal from all of Arab Jerusalem, or rescind in any way their demand for Israeli withdrawal from all the territories, or raise any slight inclination that the “Palestinian right of return” might be politically finessed. Although fully aware of Israel’s red-lines, it seemed as if Arafat knew that if he waited long enough Barak would make an additional compromise or change a view, bringing the limits of the Israeli negotiating stance on any of these issues, even if only by inches, each time closer to the Palestinian viewpoint. Barak not only enumerated what he would do but what was not negotiable. He sparked an expected negative Palestinian comment when he told his cabinet on 8 November and reiterated it again the next day with Arafat present at the Paris meeting of the Socialist International Congress that UNSC Resolution 242 was not applicable to the West Bank and Gaza; Barak reasoned that the resolution applied only to sovereign states and not organizations. During his speech to the Congress, Barak said that while Israel wants “political separation from the Palestinian areas, economic cooperation” between the two peoples would continue.⁷² While physical separation was his political objective, Barak had just three weeks earlier suggested economic separation between Israel and the future Palestinian entity. Whether he used the prospects of future economics as well a physical separation as a negotiating lever with Arafat to achieve other concessions is not clear, but what is clear is that Barak laid down his definitional markers for Israel’s future relationship with a Palestinian state; the debate was over about whether there would be such a state. Barak’s definition of that state-to-state relationship was premised on the notion that the Palestinian state would not be a security threat to Israel, and Israel would control aspects of the Palestinian state’s prerogatives that might threaten Israeli state security. Barak proposed separation but not Israeli detachment from the future Palestinian state. He proposed a separate economy, a free trade agreement, broad economic cooperation, sharing know-how and raw materials, with some Palestinians working in Israel. And he asserted the belief that the Palestinians “will not want to be fully integrated into our economy, use our currency, or accept limitations from access to world markets; they will want to have and control their own economy, value their own currency, and determine their own markets.”⁷³

After his earlier speech at the Socialist International Congress, Barak brushed off reporters' questions about Arafat's demand that Israel “withdraw from all of Jerusalem, Latrun, and Bethlehem,” by saying one had “to get used to hearing speeches in the coming days,” because we have “entered the difficult, painful part of the negotiations.”⁷⁴ Movement in PA-Israeli negotiations continued. Arafat and Barak met again, this time in Oslo on 1 November to take part in two days of ceremonies honoring the memory of Yitzhak Rabin. The next day, they met together with Clinton, again on the best ways to approach final status talks: deal with all the issues simultaneously or establish separate committees for each topic. Barak considered a third option of establishing three categories of issues: those that were non-negotiable [like Jerusalem], those that were vital but negotiable, and those where there was a measure of flexibility on both sides. Barak also wanted the U.S. to convene a Camp David-style summit early in 2000. Despite a

pipe bomb incident in Netanya that injured 27 Israelis, the PA and Israel had their four final status teams meet for the first time on 8 November. The meetings alternated between Ramallah and Jerusalem where the issues were discussed as a package rather than as separate committees; nonetheless, each side had sub-teams of the whole that focused on a) boundaries, settlements, and security; b) the nature of the future Palestinian entity, its foreign policy, and the issue of refugees; c) water and economic issues, and d) the issue of Jerusalem.⁷⁵

For the Israelis, Oded Eiran, Israel's Ambassador to Jordan, led the final status team, while Yasir Abd Rabbuh headed the PA delegation. Progress on discussion of final status issues was hampered by the lack of progress or expected level of fulfillment of obligations made originally at Wye and reconfirmed in the SSA. The two sticking points, which remained so until the end of the year, were Israel's fulfillment of the second state of the next withdrawal and final prisoner release. The prisoner release was carried out on 29 and 30 December, but no draft of a framework agreement on permanent status (FAPS) was completed by the end of the year. Though Arafat and Barak met one more time before the end of the year, this time in Ramallah on 21 December, Barak and Israel's focus had turned toward the Syrian-Israeli track, a reality that did not make Arafat happy at all. An American negotiator recalled that when Arafat learned from a television announcement of the proposed high-level Syrian-Israeli talks in Washington in mid-December, he was "sullen, even pale."⁷⁶ The Palestinian press, particularly *al-Ayyam*, during the latter part of December after the Barak-Shara meetings in Washington, took a particularly worrisome view that Syrian-Israeli talks would deflect the focus away from the Israeli-Palestinian track, and that, in keeping with the Egyptian-Israeli precedent, Israel would sign a treaty with another contiguous Arab neighbor while it continued to treat the Palestinians with a heavy and high-handed manner.⁷⁷

The Syrian-Israeli Track

During the first five months of the year, there was no movement at all on the Syrian-Israeli track. The most notable point emerged with the Israeli Parliament's 26 January passage [by 53-30] of the first reading of a Golan Heights Law. Sponsored by the Third Way Party, it required that any change in the status of Israeli sovereign territory (including the Golan) had to first be approved by a 61-vote majority in the Knesset and endorsed by a simple majority of citizens voting in a national public referendum.⁷⁸ Such a parliamentary act succeeded in its intent of currying support among settlers in the Golan and, likewise, antagonized the Syrian government. At the end of May, a flurry of articles appeared in the Israeli press claiming that a whole series of private Israeli-Syrian talks had taken place during Netanyahu's tenure.⁷⁹ Secret Israeli-Syrian discussions were held at various times from 1997 through 1999 via a series of intermediaries, including Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf Ben Alawi, European Union Special Envoy to the Middle East Miguel Moratinos, American businessman Ronald Lauder, and Advisor to Netanyahu, Uzi Arad. Included in the discussion on the Israeli side was Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, Major General (Res) Danny Yatom, and then Head of the Planning Division Major General Shaul Mofaz, who would later become the IDF Chief of Staff. For a variety of reasons, no breakthrough was made on the Syrian-Israeli track, including the fact that Netanyahu was unwilling to withdraw

from all of the Golan Heights as Assad had demanded.

After his election, Barak reportedly sent via Itamar Rabinovich, former Israeli Ambassador to Washington and primary interlocutor for the Rabin government in negotiations with Syria, a message to Clinton that Israel was prepared to restart the Syrian-Israeli track in earnest.⁸⁰ Then, in an interview published in mid-June in *Haaretz*, Barak expressed his desire to resume peace negotiations with Syria. Barak stated that he would offer Syrian President Hafez elAssad an enticing package, including an agreement on the Golan. However, the prime minister-elect maintained that he would not discuss withdrawal from the Golan until he determined what Israel would receive from the normalization of relations with Syria. Barak then drew his distinction between the Palestinian and Israeli track, “The Palestinians are the source of the legitimacy of the continuation of the conflict, but they are the weakest of all our adversaries. The Syrians are a source of conventional strength that can generate a major collision.”⁸¹ Following this public statement, Barak and Syrian President Assad traded unanticipated laudatory comments about the other through the writings of Patrick Seale, a British follower of Assad and historian of modern Syria. Seale quoted Assad as saying that Barak was “a strong and honest man [who] can accomplish whatever he decides to do,” and Barak praised Assad for having created “a strong, independent, self-confident Syria” and calling Syria the “keystone of peace” in the region.⁸²

“A courtship, unfamiliar in Arab-Israeli dialogue” is how one Palestinian commentator labeled the Assad-Barak meeting in his inaugural speech as prime minister on 6 July, Barak said that the peace process would be his top priority, that he hoped to conduct simultaneous negotiations with the PA and Syria, and would withdraw troops from Lebanon within the year. Skepticism about Israeli intentions to actually withdraw from Lebanon or the Golan accompanied the Assad-Barak exchange. Barak’s conciliatory words in the official Syrian newspaper, *al-Thawrah*, were variously viewed as “tactics of maneuvering and deception” or a “public relations job.”⁸³

Throughout the fall, Palestinian-Israeli negotiations headlined the negotiating process, particularly after the signing of the SSA. Quietly, ideas were exchanged between Damascus and Jerusalem. On 7 December, discussions about renewal of Israeli-Syrian talks reached a critical juncture after Secretary of State Albright’s visit to Damascus and her three hours of talks with President Assad. Throughout the fall, Clinton and Barak had discussions about renewing Syrian-Israeli talks; the topic was reportedly discussed on 18-19 November during the Istanbul meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Details in these discussions developed from a variety of sources, including the intercession of French intermediaries along with dozens of phone calls Clinton had with Assad and Barak since August 1999. On 8 December, Clinton announced that Syrian Foreign Minister Shara and Israel’s Barak would meet in Washington the following week, with a follow-up session of intensive negotiations to occur at an undetermined location.⁸⁴

In reacting to the Clinton announcement of the upcoming Syrian-Israeli talks, the official Syrian media, historically hostile to Israel and antagonistic to the United States for adopting, promoting, and supporting Israeli views about all aspects of the conflict and its resolution, adopted a distinctly uncommon warmth to the United States as a result of the Clinton announcement. Echoing a sentiment of hopefulness and cordiality, Turki Saqr, the editor of Syria's governmental organ, *alBaath*, remarked in an editorial the day after Clinton's announcement "that Syria wants normal relations with the U.S. based on mutual respect, equality, shared interests, and noninterference in internal affairs; and, secondly, that Syria means what it says when it announces that peace is its strategic choice."⁸⁵ Airing the hopes of improved Syrian-Israeli relations *prior* to the convocation of the Israeli-Syrian talks and *prior* to possible negotiating results clearly indicated that Assad's Syria believed or hoped that Barak would execute full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, because without it the enhancement of Syrian-U.S. relations would not ensue. Put differently, Assad would not likely have consented to send his foreign minister for public talks with an Israeli prime minister, in Washington, under the auspices of the American president, if he did not sincerely believe that full Golan withdrawal would be the outcome of the discussions. Media reactions in Israel and the Arab world speculated about why the talks broke down in 1996, who was responsible for that shut-down, all the issues associated with a possible Syrian-Israeli agreement (security matters, limited force zones after withdrawal, degree(s) of withdrawal, future borders, water issues, degree(s) of normalization, timetables for implementing an agreement, the costs associated with an agreement, and whether the U.S. would defray such costs and to what degree), the immediate and interim impact of a future Syrian-Israeli agreement on the pace of progress on the Palestinian-Israeli track, the impact talks might have on Barak's promise to withdraw from Lebanon by July 2000, Syria's future relationship with Iran, Hizballah, and Lebanon, speculation on Syrian interest in upgrading its economy by reaching out to the West and to the United States in a post-agreement environment, and how Barak's promised referendum on a Syrian agreement would fair with the Israeli electorate. Overall, there was a measure of guarded optimism from virtually all Israeli and Arab sources that these talks would lead to significant changes for the better for Syria, Israel, and the region.

In his 8 December announcement of the renewal of Syrian-Israeli talks after an hiatus of four years, Clinton said that the negotiations would resume "from the point at which they left off" with no preconditions.⁸⁶ Such a carefully stated formulation allowed each side to interpret the framework for negotiation in its own way. For Syria, that meant resuming the talks based on what it believed to be the "ostensible" commitment made by Yitzhak Rabin for Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights to the 4 June 1967 lines; the Israeli view held by Barak was that such a statement floated by Rabin was not a commitment but was instead a possible scenario *if* there would be full peace provided in exchange for full withdrawal. Barak publicly opposed the 4 June 1967 border, arguing that it included an area which "Syria seized in an act of aggression," and its control by Syria would put "Israel's water sources at risk."⁸⁷ Nonetheless, Barak believed that "Assad was a sober man, who made a mistake when he thought [the late Prime Minister Yitzhak]

Rabin deceived him. We hope he will not repeat the same mistake...all of our struggle for years was to bring the Syrians to a meeting at the political level...this is a historic opportunity.”⁸⁸ Prior to his departure to Washington, Barak told the Israeli Parliament that, for peace with Syria, Israel would have to pay a “heavy territorial price.”⁸⁹

From the Israeli Parliament, he won a close vote of confidence [47-31 with 24 abstentions] to negotiate with the Syrians. Israel’s opposition leader, Ariel Sharon, opposed the conditions upon which the talks were to take place, saying that “the government’s consent to restart the negotiations from the point where they stopped three years ago is the Barak government’s total surrender to the Syrian demands.”⁹⁰ With 55 Knesset members either opposed or abstaining and Sharon’s apprehension of Barak’s intentions clearly stated, a majority of the Israeli Jewish public opposed trading the Golan Heights for a peace agreement. Comparisons about the Israeli public’s views about peace with Syria when made between January and December 1999 revealed that at the end of the year 50% were certain there would be peace with Syria, a jump of 10%. And yet at the end of the year, more Israelis (62% as compared to 50% in January) were opposed to giving up the Golan Heights if that meant the price of obtaining a peace treaty with Syria. When asked in mid-December, in the event that Israel is faced with only one of two options full withdrawal from the Golan Heights in return for a full peace agreement or maintaining the status quo, i.e. retaining Golan without a peace agreement -- 39% opted for a full withdrawal, 50% favored retaining the status quo, and 11% were undecided. Thus, at the time of Barak’s discussions with Shara, the Israeli public possessed a greater certainty that there would be peace with Syria, but greater reluctance to withdraw from the Golan Heights to achieve that objective.⁹¹

In Washington, the Syrian-Israeli talks under Clinton’s direction began on 15 December with a welcoming ceremony at the White House. Five years earlier (21 December 1994), Barak, then as Israel’s chief of staff, had detailed discussions with his Syrian counterpart about security issues associated with a Golan withdrawal. This time, Barak’s discussions had obvious symbolic and political implications as well. These were public talks about establishing a political framework; these were not talks that were designed to ratify an understanding or agreement previously negotiated secretly behind the scenes. There was no discussion about the contents or drafting of a final Syrian-Israeli agreement.

In their respective opening remarks in mid-December, Clinton predicted obstacles along the negotiating path, but noted that for “the first time in history, there is a chance for a comprehensive peace between Israel and Syria and indeed all its neighbors;” Barak said that Israel was determined to do whatever it could “to bring about the dreams of children and mothers all around the region to see a better future for the Middle East at the entrance to the new millennium;” while al-Shara was more businesslike, bringing greetings from Assad, while emphasizing “that peace for Syria means the return of all its occupied land.”⁹² Hence, when Shara, in his opening remarks, read a list of Syrian grievances against Israel and did not shake Barak’s hand, Israelis noticeably interpreted the absence of such a gesture as one of “distance and coolness.” During the two days

of discussions, Clinton and Albright each met with Barak and Shara together and alone, but Barak and Shara did not meet alone. At the end of their two days of talks, they agreed to hold their first round of “intensive” talks in or near Washington from 3 January 2000 forward, which they did, and agreed to have the U.S. State Department manage all press briefings in order “to avoid leaks and unproductive statements.”⁹³ Between the end of the first round of procedural discussions and the January 2000 meetings, little was said about the upcoming talks, except that Barak said he wanted to focus on security and normalization issues before dealing with border and water matters. Barak apparently was keen to the difficulties in negotiating an agreement with the Syrians, hence his objective to reach a “core agreement” with Syria, something more than a declaration of principles but less than a full peace treaty.⁹⁴ By the end of the year, Barak’s views about the general possibilities of returning the Golan Heights for the prospects of a possible final agreement with Syria and his views about making deeper withdrawals and other concessions on the Palestinian-Israeli track were far more conciliatory in tone and greater in substance than the consensus views held by many in his coalition or by the general Israeli public.

Jordanian-Israeli Relations

For the better part of the year, Jordanian-Israeli relations did not deteriorate dramatically, though anti-Israeli feeling among some parliamentary, professional, and political groups increased, particularly during the second half of the year. When King Hussein died in February, his forty-five year legacy was the establishment and protection of Jordan’s political independence and territorial integrity. Early in his life, he understood that Israel’s military strength and its interest in having a stable eastern neighbor would support his kingdom’s territorial sovereignty. Though he erred by placing his armed forces under Nasser’s control prior to the 1967 war, and lost in it the West Bank and east Jerusalem, he stayed away from the planning of the October 1973 War, lest his small country come undone. Already in the 1970s, he was being outflanked by the PLO politically in the contest for who would be the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people; he realized by the end of the 1980s that Jordan should no longer compete with the PLO for custodial rights to the West Bank. After his July 1988 strategic decision and public announcement to disengage from the West Bank and leave it to the PLO to negotiate with Israel, he moved along the path of protecting the interests of the East Bank of the Jordan, while never severing his interests in shaping the outcome for satisfaction of Palestinian political statehood aspirations. He arduously pursued this dual approach of protecting his kingdom while remaining a minor cook at the Palestinian-Israeli diplomatic stove. This was evident on more than one occasion: at and after the Madrid Middle East peace conference that followed the Gulf War, in the management of the subsequent bilateral talks from 1991-1994, the signing of the 1993 Jordanian-Israeli Washington Declaration of 1994, the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty (Article 9 on Hashemite interests in Jerusalem) of October 1994, and at the Wye River negotiations in October 1998. King Hussein wanted to be sure that the evolution and establishment of either Palestinian political rights or a Palestinian state did not adversely affect Jordan’s territorial integrity or sovereignty.

Since the early 1960s, he had hundreds of hours of secret contacts with Israeli leaders of all political shades. When he died, many Israelis, as did many Arabs and other world leaders, sensed a loss for a man of dignity and civility. The rapport which his grandfather, Abdullah, had established with Israel in the pre-state period, and Hussein's own contacts with every Israeli prime minister, added to the respect nation-wide which Israelis showed at his death. Many Israelis considered him a friend, "a noble and generous monarch,"⁹⁵ an "island of stability" in the Middle East.⁹⁶ Eitan Haber, the Director General of the Prime Minister's Office under Rabin, and who had met Hussein on numerous occasions, defined Jordanian-Israeli mutual benefits: "The existence of Jordan as a kingdom depended, at least to some extent, on the State of Israel. But Israel also owes Jordan, and certainly the Hashemite Royal House, big and deep thanks."⁹⁷ On the day of Hussein's funeral, flags on all Israeli buildings were at half mast in honor of the King.

After such prolonged pre-eminence as Jordan's ruler, it was not surprising that for much of 1999, Hussein's death opened speculation about continuity of political stability in policy, especially toward Israel, the Palestinians, and the peace process. Hussein's January return to the Kingdom with terminal cancer, his change in the succession line from Crown Prince Hassan to his oldest son, his death and funeral (attended by three former U.S. presidents and two former, one present, and one future Israeli prime minister), Abdullah's accession to power and his successful effort to consolidate it throughout the year dominated Jordan's national agenda. With his military background, Abdullah's personal and professional contacts with key Israeli military establishment officials⁹⁸ hastened to solidify an already existent pragmatic relationship vis-a-vis the Palestinian issue: Jordan wanted Palestinian political aspirations satisfied west of the Jordan River. Under Abdullah, Jordan's national interests demanded undertakings or assurances that in any final settlement, for example, the Palestinian refugee issue would not be solved at Jordan's expense, with refugees from Lebanon and Syria flocking to Jordan as the first step to their hoped-for return to pre-1967 Israel. Having suffered from a demographic surge of Palestinian influx after the 1948, 1967, and the 1991 Wars, Abdullah easily applied the principle of needing to influence if not steer a Palestinian-Israeli conclusion where Jordan's East Bank integrity would be protected. As for Israel, historically, it demanded the existence of a stable eastern neighbor as a strategic territorial buffer against countries lying to the east of Jordan; regardless of when there would be an outcome that established a Palestinian state, Israel needed the good will of Jordan to help monitor for peaceful purposes the future Jordanian-Palestinian state border. Transition from Netanyahu to Barak or Hussein to Abdullah did not change these respective core strategic interests; it certainly did not alter Jordan's weighted Palestinian demographic presence nor Jordan's territorial contiguity to Israel.

Solidification of Abdullah's rule coincided with the Israeli election campaign and Barak's candidacy. Barak's election and forward movement with the Palestinians during the second half of the year suited Abdullah's preference and need to focus on governance and domestic stabilization. Had Netanyahu been elected, Abdullah might have had to take publicly strident positions to Netanyahu's "no movement" policy. As it turned out, Barak's election and the immediate

diplomatic movement which he adopted on the Palestinian and Syrian tracks provided Abdullah additional time to defer anti-Oslo domestic pressure that might have broadened in Jordan. Put differently, Abdullah's consolidation of authority was neither distracted by a need for staunch advocacy of anti-Israeli positions nor exposed Abdullah to strong pressures from other Arab capitals to take stridently anti-Israeli positions.

As compared to the Syrian and Palestinian tracks, the Jordanian track remained understated in public but strategically critical for Barak. On his way to Washington for his first meeting with Clinton, Barak met with King Abdullah. Barak's Foreign Minister, David Levy, met with Abdullah on 10 August to report to the King about those Washington meetings. At their July meeting, bilateral Israeli-Jordanian relations were discussed, including issues put on hold during the Israeli election campaign: the development of the Aqaba-Eilat airport, an increase in the number of flights between Israel and Jordan, water issues, general strengthening of relations between the two countries, and the possibility of promoting the Peres Center for Peace project to create an oncological hospital in Naharayim with an initial investment of \$7 million. Its aim was to honor the memory of the late King Hussein. Jordan regularly asked Israeli officials to make it easier and not obstruct the export of Jordanian goods to the West Bank and Gaza.⁹⁹ In the August visit of Israeli officials to Amman, Jordan agreed to reactivate some 17 bilateral agreements that had been suspended because of the impasse in the peace process under Netanyahu.¹⁰⁰ These agreements included additional discussions about linking fiber-optic networks and promotion of economic benefits to be derived from their peace treaty, including tourism. At the end of August, Israel approved Jordan's request to obtain parts of its winter water share directly from the Yarmuk River rather than from Lake Tiberias as stipulated in their 1994 Treaty.¹⁰¹

While bilateral relations improved, Jordanian professional unions and political opposition groups created an ad-hoc coalition, the National Conference to Fight Normalization (NCFN), which was established prior to the fifth anniversary of the Jordanian-Israeli treaty. This organization had several objectives, including to black-list professionals who had significant contact with Israel, boycott Israeli products, and intimidate clients of companies dealing with Israel. Individual professional associations and unions took some action against members expelling lawyers, reporters, and artists. In December, the leadership of the NCFN froze the membership of the Jordan Press Association in their organization because it refused to expel three journalists who visited Israel in September.¹⁰² A similar group of professional organizations opposed to normalization was formed in Algeria in December.¹⁰³ Just prior to the signing of the SSA between Barak and Arafat, Jordanian authorities arrested a dozen Hamas activists and kept the pressure on throughout the end of the year. Such anti-normalization activity and the Jordanian government's reply took place in the days prior to Secretary of State Albright's visit to the region, which occurred during the first days of September.¹⁰⁴ Just as King Hussein was a witness to the October 1988 WRM, King Abdullah was a witness to the agreement signed at the SSA.

Arab Anti-normalization with Israel Sustained

Arab state relations with Israel, including those with treaties (Egypt and Jordan), were also much cooler in the first half of the year than after Barak's elections. However, in most cases, Arab anti-normalization attitudes toward Israel were consistently urged and not dependent on who was Israel's prime minister. Arab anti-normalization feelings toward Israel existed on several levels: opposition to Israel's very existence, opposition to Israel as a majority Jewish state, opposition to Arab or Moslem willingness to negotiate with Israel under the Oslo process or in any fashion, opposition to the maintenance of both the Jordanian-Israeli and Egyptian-Israeli peace treaties, and a fear that Israel, if given the chance, might economically overpower its Arab neighbors and ultimately dominate the entire Middle Eastern region. Such attitudes emanated from a variety of sources: official Arab government media outlets, non-governmental Arab media, Arab professional organizations, and from Israeli Arabs.

Throughout the year, Arab concern and opposition to normalizing Israel's relations with Arab states were regular themes in the governmental and non-governmental Arab press. While the negotiating process moved forward, however slow or tortuous, the fear persisted that Israel was being accepted as a state in the Middle East. Firm ideological and philosophical attitudes were articulated within anti-normalization statements: they focused on a variety of themes from avoiding normalization with Israel because it undercut Palestinian negotiations with Israel to punishing those who engaged in normalization. Also included in Arab anti-normalization writings were anti-Zionist renditions about Israel's creation to American responsibility for stimulating Arab-Israeli normalization. Anti-normalization writings included mention of the "weakness of the Arab nation" in coping with Israel as a reality, fears of what would occur to Arab culture because of movements toward normalization, and reasons to oppose it. In January, an editorial in the Palestinian paper, *al-Hayah al-Jadidah*, characterized normalization with Israel as "immoral and an inexcusable state."¹⁰⁵ In a January issue of the Jordanian paper, *Al-Arab al-Yom*, fear was expressed about a Jewish cultural invasion and the need to oppose normalization because "Jews are our enemies," they "stole our homeland...and robbed us of our right...uprooted its people and declared war on the Muslims."¹⁰⁶ In March, after Abdullah's succession in Jordan, the Moslem Brotherhood presented its political program which not unexpectedly called for a halt in Arab normalization of relations with Israel.¹⁰⁷ About the same time, Lebanese Hizballah Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah said that "any normalization of relations with Israel is, clearly, unacceptable...we will resist it using all available means."¹⁰⁸ In reaction to the 1998 WRM which called for a reduction of verbal incitement as a means to improve normalization between Israel and its neighbors, the Federation of Arab Journalists specifically rejected this effort because it was viewed as an Israeli excuse to restrict "freedom of the press and expression in Arab countries."¹⁰⁹ In September, Palestinian Hamas leader Sheikh Yasin was quoted as saying that "normalization of ties with Jews produces a submissive and capitulationist generation."¹¹⁰

In Lebanon, at the same time as their Algerian and Jordanian counterparts were organizing, a national committee to resist normalization with Israel was announced by the Lebanese Press Association; its stated goal was to urge the Lebanese government to resist “normalization at the largest scale.”¹¹¹ Often, the U.S. was blamed for promoting Arab normalization of relations with Israel. In the shadow of Mauritanian-Israeli relations reaching full diplomatic status by the end of 1999, a writer in the Palestinian *al-Quds* accused Washington of leading “the campaign of Israeli-Arab normalization with economic, military, and political seductions” to the Arabs.¹¹² When in November, Algerian President Bouteflika announced a warming of relations with Israel, Arafat’s Fatah Central Committee vehemently attacked the Algerian president for rushing toward normalization with Israel, suggesting his actions were an “overt collusion with the Zionist enemy [and]...a stab in the back for the Arab position [and] the Palestinian people...who have been continuing their struggle for a century to liberate their homeland from an enemy that usurped their land.”¹¹³ At the end of the year, in the pan-Arab newspaper, *al-Hayat*, Hazem Saghiyeh wrote that the sad part of normalization was that “the transition to modernism, or democracy, or progress, or Westernization should necessarily have to go through Israel...because of the wretched condition of the Arab nation and the models it offers” for governance.¹¹⁴ Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Musa said that normalization with Israel could not be expanded “while Israel expands the building of settlements, expropriates Arab land, and while the Israeli Government evades implementing the agreements signed with the Palestinian party.”¹¹⁵ Libyan leader Qaddafi, never shy, said normalization with Israel would only be possible “when the millions of displaced Palestinians return to Palestine and there are UNSupervised elections and a democratic Palestinian state in which there are Arabs and Jews. But that would no longer be Israel.”¹¹⁶

As compared to the year’s beginning, by the end of the year, while noticeable movements on the Palestinian-Israeli and Syrian-Israeli tracks were active, such diplomatic progress did not change general Arab skepticism and mistrust about Israeli intentions or, in some cases, the Oslo process in general. Conversely, among Israelis, there was a degree of guarded optimism, even enthusiasm, due to movement on the Palestinian-Israeli track and a unique breakthrough in Syrian-Israeli talks. What caused this different outlook about Israeli legitimacy and Israel’s role in a Middle Eastern future?

Israelis, for the most part, continued to accept the legitimacy of all Arab states, while the majority of its Arab and Moslem neighbors remained dubious at best about Israel’s legitimacy to be a majority Jewish state. With a persecution complex as part of the national fiber, Israelis wanted to be accepted and, therefore, possessed unrealistic expectations that the chances for genuine peace with Syria and the Palestinians were possible. There remained a significant Arab view that Israel controlled the negotiations, that the Israelis were going too slow in implementing full withdrawal from the territories, that the international community cared little about the Palestinian issue, or that the entire Oslo process was a hoax and should be abandoned. Writing in a UAE paper, Egyptian commentator Mohammad SidAhmad suggested that the Syrians and Palestinians work in concert in negotiating with Israel, while ruefully acknowledging that “Barak...holds virtually

all the cards on the Palestinian track...”¹¹⁷ Typical of differing views across the Arab to Israel spectrum were remarks by a variety of different officials. Among Palestinian leaders, Arafat adviser Bassam Abu-Sharif bemoaned the nonchalance and indifference of the international community in its attitude toward the Palestinians and expressed bitterness about the “deterioration of the economic situation” and “Israel’s expansionist plans” in the territories.¹¹⁸ While Deputy Secretary General of the PFLP Abu-'Ali Mustafa vehemently stated his “rejection of the Madrid track [and] the Oslo agreements,” and called “on the Palestinian leadership to halt the ongoing negotiations with Israel.”¹¹⁹ Israeli Hadash Arab Party Chairman MK Mohammad Baraka was equally blunt as any of Israel’s neighbors in defiling Israel and in defining its institutions as racist.¹²⁰ In late November, Israeli Arab protesters in front of the prime minister’s office in Jerusalem chanted “death to the Jews.” *Hatzofe* labeled such action as Arab “incitement against Israel.”¹²¹

By contrast, a more positive outlook for the future was provided by Uri Savir, who had negotiated portions of the Oslo agreement. He noted that in “Oslo, the Palestinians discarded the dream of rejecting the State of Israel's very existence and recognized Israel as a neighbor and a partner to promote Palestinian interests. We [Israel] discarded the dream of a Greater Eretz Yisrael and terminated our control of the Palestinians' lives. The transition from a bloody conflict to peaceful relations is hard.”¹²² In evaluating the Syrian-Israeli talks, Israeli Knesset Speaker Haim Rimon realized discussions would be “long, thorny, and full of obstacles,” but “history [would] not forgive any of us if we waste this opportunity.”¹²³ Said Syrian Foreign Minister Shara, in summing up his discussions with Israeli Prime Minister Barak, “I can speak about the seriousness of Israeli Prime Minister Barak. We felt it during the two-day talks in Washington. However, I cannot speak in the same degree about optimism, because in the next round, which will be held on 3 January 2000, we will closely test this seriousness.”¹²⁴ Shara’s remarks were in stark contrast with the characterization of the peace process as “abysmal” made by his counterpart Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Musa at the beginning of 1999. By the end of the year, Barak willingly put his foot on the negotiating process accelerator. In so doing, he accepted the reality that he would have to negotiate the emotionally and strategically painful details associated with Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, the West Bank, and Golan Heights. Where there were no public negotiations at the beginning of the year, their stunning presence at the end of the year was obvious, yet fraught with the uncertainty of defining the devil’s details.

Endnotes Legend JP= Jerusalem Post; DR= Daily Report-Foreign Broadcast Information Service- Near East and South Asia (published by the Department of Commerce); JPS =Journal of Palestine Studies, NYT=New York Times' WP=Washington Post;

1. "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (Spring 1999), p. 117.
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3. *Maariv*, 26 November 1999.
4. "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (Spring 1999), p. 124.
5. "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 29, No. 2, (Winter 2000), p. 132.
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7. Commentary by 'Ali Silwan, *Tishrin*, 26 January 1999, (DR).
8. Remarks by Chief Editor of MENA (Cairo), Mahfuz al-Ansari, 16 January 1999, (DR).
9. See Makram Muhammad Ahmad, "What If Netanyahu Wins?" *alMusawwar* (Cairo) (DR); 26 March 1999. See also remarks by Saeb 'Urayaqaat, Chief Palestinian Negotiator and Local Government Minister in the Palestinian Authority, *Cairo Voice of the Arabs* (0610 GMT), 27 March 1999, (DR).
10. Remarks by Abu-Mazin, *al-Ayyam*, 25 January 1999, (DR, 29 January 1999).
11. *WP* and *NYT*, 29 December 1998.
12. Remarks by Benjamin Netanyahu, date of interview not given, as quoted in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 18 January 1999.
13. EU Council conclusions on the Middle East peace process, 25 January 1999, *EU Bulletin*, <http://europa.eu.int/abc/doc/off/bull/en/9901/p104102.htm>.
14. Remarks by Amnon Shahaq, 6 January 1999, *IDF Radio* (DR).
15. *Haaretz*, 16 May 1999.
16. See remarks by Hasan 'Asfur, PA Minister of State for Negotiating Affairs, *Voice of the Arabs* (Cairo), 21 January 1999, (DR); *al-Thawrah* (Damascus), 2 January 1999, (DR, 7 January 1999).
17. *JP*, 20 April 20, 1999.

18. Remarks by Netanyahu at the Likud Central Committee at Tel Aviv's Cinerama Hall, broadcast on Israel Televisions Channel 1 Network, 27 December 1998, (DR, 12 January 1999).
19. *JP*, 18 January 1999.
20. *JP*, 20 April 1999.
21. Remarks by Benjamin Netanyahu to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, *JP*, 18 March 1999.
22. Remarks by Ehud Barak on Israel Television Channel 1, 27 December 1998 (DR, 28 December 1998).
23. "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (Spring 1999), p. 114.
24. *JP*, 5 February 1999.
25. "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 28, No. 4, (Summer 1999), p. 123
26. *NYT*, 10 February 1999.
27. Remarks by Muhammad Dahlan, Director of Palestinian Security in the Gaza Strip, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 10 January 1999, (DR, 11 January 1999).
28. *Haaretz*, 2 February 1999.
29. *Maariv*, 29 April 1999.
30. *Al-Ayyam*, 26 March 1999, (DR).
31. Ephraim Yaar and Dr. Tamar Hermann, *Peace Index March 1999*, The Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Studies, http://www.tau.ac.il:9903/peace/p_index.html.
32. Remarks by Bassam Abu-Sharif, *Al-Quds*, 25 March 1999, (DR).
33. Remarks by Bassam Abu-Sharif, *Al-Quds*, 25 March 1999, (DR).
34. *Le Monde*, 29 March 1999.
35. Conclusions of the EU Presidency 41/43, "Middle East Peace Process," 24 March 1999, Bulletin EU 3-1999, <<http://europa.eu.int/abc/doc/off/bull/en/9903/i1042.htm>>.
36. See Cairo MENA (0645 GMT) 29 March 1999 (DR); see remarks by Saeb 'Urayaqaat, *Cairo Voice of the Arabs* (0610 GMT), 27 March 1999, (DR).
37. *WP*, 17 March 1999.
38. *NYT*, 27 April 1999.
39. *Yediot Aharanot*, 24 March 1999.

40. *NYT*, 28 April 1999.
41. Survey of the Palestine Research and Studies Center, 15-17 April, Nablus, as quoted in the "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 28, No. 4, (Summer 1999), p. 126.
42. Ephraim Yaar and Dr. Tamar Hermann, *Peace Index March 1999*, The Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Studies, http://www.tau.ac.il:9903/peace/p_index.html.
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44. *JP*, 25 May 1999.
45. "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 29, No. 1, (Autumn 1999), p. 106.
46. *WP* and *NYT*, 25 June 1999.
47. *WP* and *NYT*, 21 May 1999.
48. *WP* and *NYT*, 31 May 1999.
49. Salamah Ahmad Salamah, *al-Ahram*, 19 May 1999, (DR).
50. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 19 May 1999, (DR).
51. Remarks by Mahmud 'Abbas (Abu-Mazin), as quoted in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 19 June 1999, (DR).
52. Hatim Abu-Sha'ban, member of the PNC, *al-Quds*, 23 May 1999, (DR).
53. Editorial by Tukri Saqr, *al-Ba'th*, 20 May 1999, (DR).
54. *Al-Dustur*, 20 May 1999, (DR).
55. Remarks by Husni Mubarak, 24 May 1999, MENA (DR); and Usamah al-Baz, as quoted in *al-Ahram*, 24 May 1999, (DR).
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58. *Hatzofe*, 18 May 1999.
59. *NYT* and *WP*, 28 July 1999.
60. *NYT* and *WP*, 30 July 1999.
61. Robert Satloff, "Lucky Sharm? The Latest Israel-PLO Deal," *The New Republic*, 27 September 1999.

62. Danna Harman, "Wye, Sharm What's the Difference?" *JP*, 5 September 1999.
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64. Danna Harman, "Wye, Sharm What's the Difference?" *JP*, 5 September 1999.
65. *JP*, 5 September 1999 and *Maariv*, 6 September 1999.
66. *Al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 6 September 1999, (DR).
67. *Al-Hayat*, 21 September 1999, (MEM).
68. *Al-Hayat*, 7 September 1999, (MEM).
69. *Al-Ayyam*, 8 September 1999.
70. Remarks by Usamah al-Baz, 10 September 1999, MENA, (DR).
71. *Al-Ayyam*, 9 September 1999, (DR). This view was also expressed by Dan Margalit, *Haaretz*, 6 September 1999.
72. "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 29, No.2, (Winter 2000), p. 187.
73. Excerpts from remarks by Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Israeli Policy Forum Dinner, New York, NY, 20 November 1999, <<http://www.mfa.gov>>; for a detailed analysis of Barak's preferred negotiating stances vis-a-vis the Palestinians, see Shimon Schiffer, *Yediot Aharonot*, 2 December 1999.
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81. *Haaretz*, 18 June 1999.
82. *Al-Hayat*, 20 June 1999; *WP* and *NYT*, 24 June 1999.

83. *Al-Thawrah*, 9 July 1999 (DR) and 7 August 1999 (DR).
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86. *WP* and *NYT*, 9 December 1999.
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89. *WP* and *NYT*, 14 December 1999.
90. Remarks by Ariel Sharon, as quoted on *Israel Radio*, 9 December 1999 (MEM).
91. Ephraim Yaar and Dr. Tamar Hermann, *Peace Index January and December 1999*, The Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Studies, <http://www.tau.ac.il:9901> and [9912/peace/p_index.html](http://www.tau.ac.il:9912/peace/p_index.html).
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95. Chemi Shalev, *Maariv*, 6 February 1999.
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98. *JP*, 19 February 1999.
99. "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 29, No. 1, (Autumn 1999), p. 113.
100. "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 29, No. 2, (Winter 2000), p. 126.
101. *The Jordan Times*, 24 August 1999; "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 29, No. 2, (Winter 2000), p. 127.
102. "Peace Monitor," *JPS*, Vol. 29, No. 3, (Spring 2000), p. 121.
103. *Al-Hayat*, 28 November 1999, as quoted in *MEM*, 1 December 1999.
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107. *AlWatan al'Arabi*, 12 March 1999, (DR).
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111. *Beirut Radio Lebanon*, 16 September 1999, (DR).
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114. *AlHayat*, 15 November 1999, (MEM).
115. Remarks by 'Amr Musa, 19 December 1999, MENA, (DR).
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117. *AlKhaleej*, 17 December 1999, (MEM).
118. *Al-Quds*, 30 December 1999, (DR).
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120. See *Haaretz*, 7 October 1999.
121. *Hatzofe*, 25 November 1999.
122. Remarks by Uri Savir, *Maariv*, 4 November 1999.
123. Remarks by Haim Ramon, *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 11 December 1999, (DR).
124. Remarks by Farouq Al-Shar'a, Beirut, Radio Lebanon, 20 December 1999, (DR).