

Rabinovich, Itamar. *The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998.

*The Brink of Peace* provides a fascinating insider's account of the Israeli-Syrian negotiations during the halcyon days of the Middle East peace process. The author, Itamar Rabinovich, headed the Israeli delegation to the talks throughout most of the period from July 1992 to their suspension in early March 1996, while at the same time serving as Ambassador to the United States. He approaches his subject as a diplomatic historian: Rabinovich has a long and distinguished academic career as a specialist on Syrian history and politics, and is currently Professor of History at Tel Aviv University -- where he holds the Yona and Dina Ettinger Chair in the Contemporary History of the Middle East -- as well as A.D. White Professor-at-Large at Cornell University. There is always the temptation for those involved in important historical events to use memoirs as vehicles for *post-hoc* justification. Rabinovich succeeds remarkably well in avoiding this trap.

After a brief survey of the Israel-Syria dispute from Israel's War of Independence in 1948-49 to the antagonists' historic meeting at the Madrid conference and the ensuing five rounds of negotiations in Washington, Rabinovich takes up the story with his appointment to lead the Israeli delegation on the Syrian track following Yitzhak Rabin's election victory in June 1992. He then recounts the tortuous course of the talks during his watch. As a negotiator, he provides a revealing glimpse into the mechanisms of the negotiations, as well as the interaction of the personalities involved. As an historian, he situates these discussions within the context of the broader Middle East peace process -- specifically, the Palestinian and Jordanian tracks -- and the critical US-Israel strategic relationship. This account, however, is more than simply a nostalgic "stroll down memory lane." Through this examination of the events of 1992-96, Rabinovich seeks to answer several pressing questions, foremost among them: why did the parties fail to reach an agreement?; was there a "missed opportunity" for peace, and, if so, why?

The fact that the negotiations failed to produce an agreement puzzled many outside observers. The core compromise seemed obvious: full peace for full withdrawal. Syria had to accept a "warm peace" with Israel, including normalization, diplomatic relations, open borders, and free movement of people and goods. For its part, Israel had to withdraw fully from the Golan Heights, though the final line to which it must fall back -- i.e., whether the 4 June 1967 line or the international border between Syria and mandatory Palestine -- remained at issue. Despite the seeming simplicity of the bargain, neither side would formally commit to this formula. Instead, they wrapped their language in ambiguity. Rabin spoke of "the depth of withdrawal [reflecting] the depth of peace," (p. 83) implying full Israeli withdrawal for full peace. Asad told his American interlocutors that normal peaceful relations with Israel would include the "passage of people and goods according to Syria's laws and regulations," (p. 152) a phrase that Rabinovich said "could be either an innocuous formulation or coded language for a very limited level of normalization . . . that could turn the treaty's text into a dead letter." (p. 152)

Why the reluctance to commit explicitly and formally to this bargain? Rabinovich's account makes clear that both sides suffered from what can be described as the "you go first" syndrome. Rabin and Asad were both prudent and cautious men. Neither was willing to play his trump card -- withdrawal or normalization -- without an unequivocal guarantee of what he would receive in return. With neither willing or able to take the, admittedly, high-risk first step, the negotiations remained deadlocked.

Did this hesitation lead either or both parties to "miss an opportunity" for peace? Rabinovich clearly believes so. In his view, Asad "missed the opportunity to come to an agreement with two Israeli governments that were willing to make it on terms that should have been acceptable to Syria." (p. 264) These opportunities were Rabin's "hypothetical exercise" in August 1993,<sup>1</sup> and Peres' "fast or slow, broad or narrow" approach from November 1995 to January 1996.

Why did Asad miss these opportunities? Basically, as Rabinovich says, he miscalculated. The Syrian leadership had a limited and stereotypical understanding of Israeli politics and society. Over the course of the negotiations, a more nuanced view was developing, but "the extent and pace of this development were too limited to have a real impact at the crucial moment." (p. 245) Essentially, Asad saw no real difference between Labor and Likud, so it apparently did not matter to him who won the Israeli elections originally scheduled for October 1996. He felt no great sense of urgency to conclude what he regarded as an inferior deal with either Rabin or Peres. For Asad, time was on his side.

Clearly, he was wrong. Benjamin Netanyahu took a harder-line approach to the Syrian track than did his two Labor predecessors. Asad recognized this difference only after the fact. There followed a desperate attempt on Syria's part to salvage what little progress had been made in the preceding four years of negotiations. Damascus insisted that the talks resume "at the point at which they had been interrupted" in March 1996. It also claimed, rather lamely, that Rabin's August 1993 "hypothetical exercise" represented a binding commitment that the Likud government was obliged to honor, a claim that neither Israel nor the US accepted.

Though Asad badly miscalculated, it does not necessarily follow that he "missed an opportunity." Rabinovich believes that Rabin and Peres offered Asad "terms that should have been acceptable to Syria." In this, he is making a value judgement. Unfortunately, opportunity, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder. What may look like an opportunity to one may not to another. Though the Israeli position evolved over the course of the negotiations, the core demand remained the same: "front-loading" the elements of peace while delaying any significant withdrawal until the strength of Syria's commitment had been tested. The Syrian position, on the other hand, was to "front-load" the withdrawal while putting off the elements of peace until a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement had been reached. Rabinovich provides a cogent assessment of the attitudes and considerations that led Asad to cling stubbornly to this position while rejecting that of the Israelis. Though he can understand Asad's reasoning, this book leaves the impression that Rabinovich cannot quite accept the legitimacy of the Syrian leader's concerns and the approach they gave rise to. He sincerely believes that the Israeli position

was reasonable from *both* the Israeli and Syrian standpoints; indeed, it would be surprising if he thought otherwise. Hence, for Rabinovich, Asad's refusal to take up the Israeli offers represents a missed opportunity.

Events subsequent to the May 1996 Israeli elections cast doubt on this judgement. Here, we must resort to the "counterfactual history" approach, with all its admitted pitfalls. Assume, for the sake of argument, that Asad had immediately agreed to the integrated package Rabin proposed in August 1993, including a three-phase implementation process extending over five years. Israel's withdrawal from the Golan would not have been completed until 1997-98, well into the mandate of the Netanyahu government.<sup>2</sup> Though one can only speculate, this government's failure to fulfill its obligations under the Oslo process and its reluctance, expressed in both word and deed, to commit itself to the land-for-peace principle on the Golan suggest that it would likely have found some reason to delay implementing the treaty. For example, it might accuse Syria of not living up to its obligations on normalization, and repeat the formulation used with the Palestinians: "if they give, they will get -- if they don't give, they won't get."

This would place Damascus in an extremely difficult position. With the elements of peace "front-loaded" in the treaty, it would have already given up its only bargaining chip with Israel. Moreover, it would likely come under tremendous pressure, especially from Washington, not to back-track on those elements already in place, for example, withdrawing its diplomats from Israel or closing its borders with that country. All this is to suggest that, given the risk of breakdown associated with an agreement whose implementation extends across governmental mandates, a "front-loaded" treaty may ultimately work to the disadvantage of the party that gives first. From this perspective, the Rabin - Peres packages may have been less of an "opportunity" than Rabinovich believes.

Rabinovich's story provides important insights both on the evolution and eventual collapse of the Israel-Syria track of the Middle East peace process as well as on the nature of negotiations in general. His is an admirably balanced account, given that he was an interested party intimately involved in the events he describes. One can only hope that, at some point, a similar recounting of events from the Syrian perspective may emerge to help round out the story.

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## **Endnotes**

1. During his meeting with US Secretary of State Warren Christopher on 3 August 1993, Rabin asked him to explore with Asad whether he would be willing to sign a peace treaty without linking it to progress on the other tracks, whether he was prepared for "real peace" and all that that entailed, and whether he would offer the elements of peace before the completion of withdrawal. This assumed, Rabin said, that the Syrian president's own territorial demands were satisfied. Disappointed in Asad's response as reported to him by

Christopher, Rabin decided to move ahead with the Palestinian track, and the Oslo agreement was initialled some three weeks later.

2. Of course, the fact that a settlement had been reached with the last major confrontation state (and, presumably, with Lebanon, given the linkage between the two tracks) might have contributed to the re-election of the Labor government in 1996, whether under Rabin's or Peres' leadership.