

An on-the-scene report from Shepherdstown

by William Jones

Entering into his final year in office, President Bill Clinton is committed to making a major effort to put into place what may prove to be the final elements in a comprehensive peace agreement for the Middle East. Largely due to the President's efforts, Syrian and Israeli delegations agreed to meet, with the United States as "facilitator," and with the participation of the President himself, for open-ended discussions in the small town of Shepherdstown, West Virginia beginning on Jan. 3.

Although Syria has been involved in the Mideast peace process since the initiation of the multilateral talks in the 1980s, not a lot of public diplomacy has been going on between Israel and Syria. Nevertheless, talks between the two continued until 1995, when the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin brought all such discussions to a screeching halt. Rabin's opponent Benjamin Netanyahu, elected as Prime Minister in 1996, was widely blamed, including by Rabin's wife, Leah, for inciting the assassination; he was not a man interested in making peace with anyone. Only with the accession to power of the Labor Party's Ehud Barak last year, was there again a possibility for bringing the Mideast peace process back on track.

The Syrian role

Syrian President Hafez al-Assad's decision to go ahead with the Shepherdstown meeting represented a change in the seriousness of the Syrian commitment to reach some agreement with Israel. Not coincidentally, it came after a series of phone calls between Assad and President Clinton. Although the Syrian leader, possibly for health reasons, did not himself come to the talks, he did send his Foreign Minister, Farouk al-Shara, who was given plenipotentiary powers to negotiate a binding agreement on Syria's behalf. It is widely believed, however, that if an agreement is reached, President Assad might appear to put his personal imprimatur on it.

The commitment to talk on the Syrian part is considered a serious one. As Ragheda Derghan, the UN diplomatic correspondent for the international Arabic newspaper *Al-Hayat*, noted, in a presentation on Jan. 4, "Syria is Syria. Their agreement to talks is sincerely intended. Once Syria commits to something, it will follow through. The leadership believes this is the last chance. If it is lost, it may not easily return. They are eager, but not desperate."

Changes in the Middle East, including a continued Israeli pull-back from the West Bank, and the emergence of an Israeli Prime Minister, Barak, intent on establishing a stable and permanent peace for Israel on the basis of the "land for peace" formula of his slain predecessor Yitzhak Rabin, has convinced even Syria's mercurial President, that now is the time to move in the direction of establishing normal relations with Israel.

Assad has taken a long time to come to the table. And yet, deprived of the massive Soviet aid on which he had subsisted on for years during the Cold War, and perhaps with an eye on creating a stable political situation in which his son could take power after he departs the scene, Assad may have decided that he should make his peace. President Clinton has long been keen on establishing some sort of rapport with the Syrian leader. When *EIR* asked on Jan. 4 about the personal role of President Clinton in creating confidence among the players in the Mideast peace process, White House press spokesman Joe Lockhart said, "Yes. I think we are at a unique time in this process, where both sides—and in fact, if you look on the comprehensive view of the Middle East peace process, the Palestinians included—have confidence in the President, have a high level of trust in the President, built over, now, seven years of working on this process. I know that Prime Minister Barak has talked about this. The President has now met with him many times. The President has spoken to President Assad countless times, in anticipation of the meetings that were kicked off today. So, I think one area that drives this process is the level of trust that exists between the parties and the President."

No 'quick fix' expected

Nobody is expecting any "quick fix," however. "I think it's fair to say that Charles Dickens's novel, *Great Expectations*, is not the novel that is being read by the negotiators and the working level officials," State Department spokesman Jamie Rubin told reporters on the first day of the talks. "We do not expect to be able to achieve a core agreement in one round of negotiations."

On the first day, Jan. 3, with the President in attendance, there were difficulties. Clinton began his day by holding separate meetings with Barak and Shara. It was thought that the three of them could then meet together, for the first time. Some "procedural" problems arose, however, which required the President to meet further with Shara and Barak separately. These issues involved Syrian objections to discussing the "security issue," prior to the issue of borders. Any Syrian-Israeli agreement would involve Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, occupied in 1967, and long considered essential to Israeli defense needs. With the advance of technology, however, relating to early warning systems, detection devices, and sophisticated weaponry, in which Israel has a definite advantage over its Arab neighbors, Israel could be provided

with the means to defend itself from a surprise attack, even without being in possession of the Golan Heights.

Barak has indicated that he would be willing to withdraw from the Golan, if he felt that Israeli defense needs could be met in other ways, largely with the aid of sophisticated technology provided by the United States. And yet, from the Israeli point of view, the decision on where the Israeli-Syrian border would lie, is very much dependent on the defense arrangements which would be available to them.

Shara, however, objected to setting a priority on the security issues over the issue of borders. Syria wants the border to lie at the line that existed on June 4, 1967, giving Syria access to Lake Tiberias and control over some key water sources, something that Barak has said would be entirely unacceptable to the Israelis. Although water is one of the specific issues to be discussed in one of the four committees, its significance intertwines all the areas of discussion.

These “procedural” difficulties required President Clinton to spend most of the first day in separate discussions with Shara and Barak. The meeting among the three leaders that had been planned for the evening of the first day (the first occasion in this conference when Barak and Shara would actually talk to each other), had to be postponed until day two.

Although the three parties did meet the next day, when President Clinton again returned to Shepherdstown, the talks began to lag shortly thereafter. Four committees, with representatives from the Israel, Syria, and the United States, dealing with the main problem areas involved in a Syrian-Israeli peace accord — security, water, borders, and normalization of relations — were formed. Indicating some of the problems that still exist, the “normalization” category was renamed by the Syrians “normal peaceful relations,” since “normalization” of relations with Israel is still considered a very sensitive issue in Syria. The only committees that met, however, were the committees on security and on “normal peaceful relations.” At the same time, the U.S. delegates to the other committees did meet with their counterparts on both sides, to convince the Syrian delegation that the issue of borders was not being ignored.

Success in the Syrian-Israel track would have profound implications for the entire Mideast peace process. If Syria makes peace with Israel, this would open the way for a viable peace with Lebanon, given the overwhelming preponderance of Syria in Lebanon — as well as its influence over the Hezbollah terrorist group operating in southern Lebanon. Initial statements by the Iranians also indicate that they would not be averse to a Syrian-Israel agreement. If the Iranians allow the Hezbollah to be transformed into a “political party,” as some statements coming from there have indicated, it might also remove the last roadblock to improved U.S.-Iranian bilateral relations. As State Department spokesman Jamie Rubin expressed it in a briefing, “This is a big, big deal.”

Mideast peace requires water, power resources

by Marcia Merry Baker

When the peace talks commenced on Jan. 3, 2000 in Shepherdstown, West Virginia between representatives of Israel and Syria, four ongoing commissions were approved on specific topics, one of which is water. This reflects the well-appreciated fact that there can be no concurrence over security, borders, and normalization of relations (the other three goals) without agreement on water. Moreover, what is involved is not simply a matter of “sharing” or observing “fair” water rights. In this ancient, long-inhabited region, there is simply not enough water to “share.”

Thus, the new peace dialogue implies a commitment to work out how new water and power resources can be provided in the common interest of all. A breakthrough in this critical part of the world would be of international strategic importance. It puts the question of infrastructure-building back on the agenda for all world leaders and concerned citizens, at a time when such nation-serving commitments are required, instead of acquiescing to the financial breakdown and chaos otherwise occurring.

In the historic 1993 Oslo Peace accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, water was also a paramount issue, but the agreements were not carried through, under the fierce anti-development climate of the declining International Monetary Fund era. Annex III of the 1993 accords was an economics protocol (“Protocol on Israeli-Palestinian Cooperation in Economic and Development Programs”) which listed nine points, the first of which concerned provision for water. The agreement was for “cooperation” in managing water resources, and “equitable utilization” of joint water supplies, as well as electricity, clearly implying the need to *make new supplies*. They were not carried through.

Technologies and plans exist

For decades, engineers have had plans for providing new water supplies in the region of the Jordan River basin, and throughout the Middle East. Technologies have been available all along, and today there are new R&D improvements.

The year 2000 Syrian-Israeli talks call to mind for many, the Mideast water supply development perspective of mid-century, named the “Johnston Plan,” in honor of a diplomat of the Eisenhower administration who promoted a framework for undertaking large-scale waterworks. During the 1950s Atoms for Peace period, there were missions and studies on