

ON THE BRINK OF PEACE? MORE ISRAELI MEMOIRS

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- Eitan Bentsur, *Ha'Derech Lashalom Overt B'madrid (The Road to Peace Crosses Madrid)*, Yediot Aharonot Books, Tel Aviv, 1997 303 pp.
- Itamar Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1998 (Published in Hebrew as *Saf Hashalom*, Yediot Aharonot Books, Tel Aviv, 1998) xv. + 283 pp.
- Uri Savir, *The Process: 1,100 Days that Changed the Middle East*, Random House, New York, 1998 (Published in Hebrew as *Ha'tahalich*, Yediot Aharonot Books, Tel Aviv, 1998) xi + 336 pp.

The Madrid Conference, held in October 1991, came at a time of unique optimism in the world, and in the Middle East in particular. The Cold War was over; the Soviet Union was on the edge of disintegration; while a coalition led by the United States and including Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia had just defeated and destroyed much of the Iraqi army. George Bush's proclivity to exaggeration notwithstanding, it seemed that a "New World Order" under the umbrella of a Pax Americana was indeed possible.

For the U.S., the first order of business after the war's abrupt end was to jump start Middle East peace talks. For three years, the Bush Administration had tried to find a formula under which the leaders of all the states involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as Palestinian representatives, could gather for negotiations. While declaring that they did not have maps or a specific settlement in mind, the Americans believed that, once the ice had been broken, by sitting together and talking to each other, Arabs and Israelis would find a workable solution.

Before 1991, the U.S. efforts were unsuccessful, as each of the parties to the dispute did little more than jockey for position. Following the Gulf War, however, the situation changed radically. Having embraced Saddam Hussein, the PLO emerged in a weakened position. In Israel, the government headed by Yitzchak Shamir recognized

that it would have to compromise in order to avoid the wrath of the Americans. In Damascus, meanwhile, Hafez Assad continued to hide his cards, lecturing U.S. officials on his version of Middle East history, while considering the costs and benefits of participation in the planned conference.

In retrospect, the Madrid Conference was the pivotal event that gave life to a sputtering but persistent Middle East peace process. Like a political big bang, its terms of reference would guide the rest of the process, and once precedents were set, they would not be readily altered. Events moved relatively slowly at first, but the pace changed in 1992, after the Israeli elections installed Yitzchak Rabin as Prime Minister. The Oslo Declaration of Principles was signed in 1993, followed the next year by the Israeli Jordanian peace treaty. Israel and Syria also began serious talks, which, at the time, were expected to lead to an agreement.

Substantively, the Madrid conference can be seen either as a masterful triumph of (mainly American) diplomacy, or, in contrast, the first step on the road to collapse. For those in Israel who view the Oslo process as a disaster, and an agreement with Syria based on withdrawal from the Golan Heights as catastrophic, Shamir's decision to go to Madrid was a huge error. In contrast, for enthusiasts of the peace process, the reluctance with which Israel agreed to participate, and the conditions that were attached, prevented a quick and historic breakthrough.

Eitan Bentsur looks at these issues from a unique perspective. As Deputy Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time, he was one of Israel's most senior professional diplomats, and a major player for over a decade. Like John Foster Dulles, he was "present at the creation." As he notes, before Madrid (or rather, before the events unleashed by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990), even the greatest optimists focused on a narrow Israeli-Palestinian arrangement, and there were no hopes for involving Syria. The Madrid formula, combining a series of parallel bilateral negotiations with five multilateral working groups, changed all that.

As can be seen in Bentsur's description, the intense negotiations that preceded the conference were more important than the words exchanged during the brief meeting. Despite the US hegemony, it took James Baker III 9 visits to the region in a

span of a few months to nail down the details. (Some members of his team, such as Dennis Ross, made the trek more often and stayed longer).

While much of this story has been told in the memoirs of other participants, each player had his own concerns and emphases. In this narrative, which is both personal and institutional, the Foreign Ministry emerges as the major facilitator and promoter of the Madrid concept in Israel. As the process developed, Bentsur and company slowly brought a skeptical Israeli government to recognize that rather than tilting at the windmills powered by Baker and Bush, Israel's interests would be served by a strategy designed to get the best possible terms for the inevitable conference.

The co-sponsors (primarily the Americans) painstakingly negotiated the letters of invitation and individual missives sent to each of the major participants. Syria's President Asad still clings to every nuance and punctuation mark, convinced that in 1991 he made all of the concessions necessary for recovering the Golan, and more importantly, to qualify for massive U.S. economic aid. The compromise that created a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation eventually legitimized the PLO, paving the way for the Oslo agreement in 1993.

Bentsur's book reminds readers that in Israel, the build-up to Madrid was far from smooth. Despite unusual restraint following the Scud attacks, relations between Jerusalem and Washington were strained. Shamir saw the international conference as a trap, where Israel would be pressured into making dangerous concessions. (Asad's "enthusiasm" was seen as evidence that the Americans had indeed prepared a trap for Israel.)

While attempting to persuade Shamir to consider some degree of cooperation, the Israeli team, including Bentsur and the MFA, sought to minimize the participation of malignant "outsiders" -- Europe, the UN, and Russia. At least the Americans -- even in the era of the cold and WASPish Baker and Bush -- understood Israel's security requirements. Israel demanded and received agreement to limit the full conference to a largely ceremonial task, while the substantive negotiations would take place in the bilateral frameworks.

Bentsur's detailed description of the road to Madrid also provides important insights into the ever-present jockeying between the bureaucrats and diplomats in the

MFA and the political leadership, including the Prime Minister and his top advisors. Shamir seemed to allow his chief advisor, Yossi Ben Aharon, free reign in blocking the American initiatives, and in neutralizing the Israeli MFA. Like so many other politicians, Shamir encouraged the face-off as a means of balancing between different perspectives, sources of power, and interests. The Americans found this very frustrating, but for Shamir, this was the only way to slow and attempt to influence the process.

Shamir's forebodings regarding the outcome of the Madrid Conference turned out to be accurate, at least with respect to his ideology and political career. Although the speeches, including the aggressive performance of Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk A'-Shara, did not mark an auspicious beginning, the dye had been cast. When the months that followed failed to bring any progress, the Israeli public wanted to accelerate the process, in the hope that Israeli risks and concessions might yield breakthroughs with both the Palestinians and Syrians. Although perhaps not the central factor, these concerns led to the victory of the Labor Party, headed by Yitzchak Rabin in the June 1992 elections.

Rabin, "Mr. Security", shared some of Shamir's skepticism, but he was even more pessimistic about the long-term impact of a standoff. In 1992, Rabin and IDF Chief of Staff Ehud Barak viewed a peace agreement with Syria as the key to ending the cycle of war that had plagued Israel since 1948.

To run the negotiations with Damascus, Rabin went outside the Foreign Ministry (like Netanyahu and later, Barak, he viewed the Ministry as overly bureaucratized, insufficiently professional, and undisciplined) and appointed Itamar Rabinovich. A professor at Tel Aviv University, Rabinovich had written extensively and knowledgeably about earlier efforts to reach a treaty with Syria. He was close and loyal to Rabin (in contrast to many other academics linked to Peres), and could be relied upon to deliver the Prime Minister's positions without injecting his own political or personal agenda. Later, Rabin also appointed Rabinovich as Israeli ambassador to the United States, and his Syrian counterpart, Ambassador Walid Mu'allim, headed his country's negotiating team. The fact that the two chief negotiators served simultaneously as

ambassadors in Washington was a reflection of the degree of American involvement in the talks.

As Rabinovich notes in this memoir (*The Brink of Peace*), Rabin wasted no time. The effort to draft a declaration of principles began in August 1992, but it moved very slowly. At every session, the Syrians pressed Israel to accept full withdrawal, before making any public gestures or confidence building measures. (Rabinovich's detailed description of the meetings, and the analysis of each of the participants on the Syrian team are, in themselves, important contributions to understanding the process.) In the absence of a response from Damascus, Rabin transferred focus to the Palestinians and the Oslo track, putting the Syrians on hold in order to avoid overloading the domestic political circuits.

The Syrians bargained from inflexible ideological positions, rather than more pliant interests. The ideology was reinforced by Hafez al-Asad's ultra-rigid negotiating style, and attempts to probe the depths of the Syrian President's views and to develop informal back-channels, failed. Rabinovich reports that even before the first meeting in August 1992, "We knew by then that Asad gave nothing without getting something in return." (p. 58)

In August 1993, as the Oslo negotiations were in their final phase, Rabin made one more effort to reach an agreement with Syria. Shuttling between Damascus and Jerusalem, U.S. Secretary of State Christopher carried questions and answers between Rabin to Asad on the details of a possible agreement. As Rabinovich notes, "August 1993 was a crucial watershed. Rabin then took an initiative, and authorized Secretary Christopher to explore in a hypothetical way Syria's readiness for a comprehensive agreement with Israel in which the possibility of withdrawal ... was put on the agenda." Indeed, as Rabinovich notes, the Syrians claimed that Rabin had responded to the American exercise, which they later confirmed was non-binding, by agreeing to a full withdrawal from the Golan. However, "President Asad did not quite pick up the glove." (p.13) Christopher reported that the Syrians "had difficulties with the very term 'normalization'." (p.106)

With no change in Asad's very negative public diplomacy, it was clear that despite the numerous meetings and shuttle trips, there was no sign of

progress. Stubborn and inflexible, Syrian President Asad was surprised when the Oslo agreement was suddenly revealed, and felt betrayed by Arafat. (Similarly, in 1996, the Syrians were not prepared when Peres lost the elections to Netanyahu.)

In considering the events from July 1993 to May 1996, the title of Rabinovich's memoirs, *The Brink of Peace*, may be misleading. Although the direct meetings and exchanges went farther than before, these talks stopped far short of agreement. At critical times, Asad dropped the ball. Although he later insisted that Rabin had told Christopher that Israel would withdraw from the entire Golan, Asad did not grab the supposed opportunity. Instead, he continued to play the Arab leadership card, supporting Hizbollah in Lebanon, providing safe haven for terrorists in Damascus, and continuing the propaganda war against Israel.

When substantive talks resumed in mid-1994, following the opening of the less formal "ambassador's channel", Rabin proposed a 3 phase-process, with the first Israeli withdrawal from the Druze villages near Mt. Hermon within 9 months after signing an accord, accompanied by Syrian steps toward normalization. The second phase would include further Israeli pullbacks over 18 months, and full withdrawal in 4-and-a-half years. (p. 140) Asad responded by demanding full withdrawal in 12 months (up from 3 initially), and also insisted on a return to the "June 4 1967" lines, as distinct from the international border). At this point, Rabin decided again that Asad was not seriously engaged. (p. 149)

In parallel, talks were held focusing on security, and at the end of 1994, the chiefs of staffs of the Israeli and Syrian armies met at the Wye Plantation outside Washington. The gaps, both perceptual and substantive, remained wide. Although both sides agreed to keep the meetings secret, the Syrians deliberately leaked their version. Rabinovich notes that "This was a bad omen. By publicizing his rejection of these Israeli demands Asad was deliberately tying his own hands." (p. 175) Ten weeks of intense American pressure and shuttle diplomacy led to the negotiation of a brief and very general "Non-paper on the Aims and Principles of the Security Arrangements", followed by a second round at Wye in June 1995. This did not go well either. "General Shihabi was determined not to share a meal or even a cup of coffee with his Israeli interlocutors." (p.181)

In 1995, Rabin needed all the political strength he could gather in the face of the waves of Palestinian suicide bombings, and when the Syrians continued to support these attacks, he broke off the talks. After the assassination, Peres was ready and even eager to reach an agreement with Asad before the May 1996 elections, but he also came up empty-handed. Although Asad complained that Rabin was too slow and cautious, he now protested that Peres was moving too fast.

Were Israel and Syria really on the brink of peace at any point during this period? Rabinovich himself provides plenty of evidence to the contrary, arguing convincingly that Syria was primarily interested in ties with the U.S., and not peace with Israel. Asad expected the Americans to “deliver” the Rabin government (p. 136, p.144). Indeed, an eager President Clinton sought to oblige, trying “several times to extract from [Rabin] whether he would be willing to accept full withdrawal as part of a settlement with Syria.” (p. 92)

Syria did not give the Americans anything in return, and when the U.S. urged Asad to open a secret channel, he refused. (Rabinovich does reveal that two individuals passed messages between Jerusalem and Damascus, but provides no information on the content or identities involved. (p.138)) In January 1994, Asad shared center stage with Clinton during a rare summit meeting in Geneva. However, instead of using this platform to alter his and Syria’s image as a spoiler, Asad’s behavior highlighted the most negative aspects of the negotiations (pp128-30). A repeat performance during Clinton’s visit to Damascus in October 1994 further alienated the Americans.

This is a masterfully written diplomatic history, the epitome of scholarly detachment, without heroes or villains. Both Rabin and Asad held their cards very closely, coming as close as possible to the “unitary rational actor model” of international politics. Both planned their moves with great care, like chess grandmasters moving their pieces slowly across the board, while looking out for traps and deeply hidden opportunities. As a result, progress, if any, was glacial.

While Rabinovich was attempting to reach a breakthrough agreement with Syria, Shimon Peres, Yosi Belin, and Uri Savir were busy negotiating with the Palestinians. Of

the three, Savir was clearly the junior partner, and the last to put his version of the Oslo process into print. For Savir, this was a personal journey, in contrast to Bentsur, who focused on the institutions (particularly the Foreign Ministry), and Rabinovich, with his focus on the competing interests of the major players. Enthralled with the visions of Shimon Peres, who took the junior diplomat from the New York consulate and made him Director General of the Foreign Ministry, Savir was also convinced that his Palestinian counterparts shared the same objectives. If there are differences, they are merely based on tactics and emphases.

For those who view the Oslo process as a well-intentioned but ultimately naive effort, Uri Savir's book (*The Process*) provides ample evidence. After the gravitas of Rabinovich's analysis, Savir's book appears light-headed. Instead of clashing national interests and the historic struggle for survival, Savir's analysis of events is simplistic and clichéd. The intense ideologists, generals, diplomats and terrorists of traditional Middle Eastern history are replaced by sentimental tales of father and daughter dreaming wistfully of peace. At the beginning of this tale, the reader is told that Savir's daughter had accompanied her parents to peace demonstrations since the age of four. As he left for the first meeting, "I wanted her to sense that one of our dreams was about to come true." (p. 7) Resistance to concessions and risks is attributed to "a kind of psychological jet lag as long-standing perceptions resist the impact of new ideas and realities." (p. ix) In contrast, "Peacemaking tries to reset perceptual clocks."

To Savir, personalities and perceptions are the critical factors. In this world, there is no room for conflicting national interests and ideologies. Rather, the coin of the diplomatic realm is based on personal relationships and trust between interlocutors. Instead of confronting real problems, Savir, like Beilin and Peres, relied on the analyses and promises of officials such as Abu Ala (Ahmed Qurei), Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas), Hassan Asfour, Sa'eb Erekat, and, at times, even Arafat.

In a chapter called, ironically, "Planning Security", Savir focuses on the terrorism that not only continued, but increased after the Palestinian Authority took control in Gaza and Jericho. As "it became clear to us that Arafat and his men were not using their new power base to dismantle Hamas", Rabin "demanded that the Palestinians do a better job of countering them." Hassan Asfour explained that "Arafat has a different

strategy, and it will succeed. Trust him; strengthen him, and you'll see. We're negotiating with Hamas, and many of their people are coming over to our side." Abu Ala revealed details of an "evolving agreement between Hamas and Fatah ... that included an end to violence and the acceptance of a central authority that would legitimize political pluralism." (p. 147)

These personal assurances from trusted partners came a few weeks before the kidnapping of Nachshon Wachsman (on the day that Nobel prizes for Rabin, Peres, and Arafat were announced) and the suicide blast on a Tel Aviv bus that killed 22 people and wounded many more. As demonstrations against "the murderous peace process" mounted, Savir reports that "Arafat still failed to grasp the extent of the menace posed by terrorism". (p. 151)

While frustrated by the terrorism and by the failure of their "partners" to act against it, Savir, like Peres and Beilin (and perhaps Rabin, although we will never know) was so committed to the Oslo process that, as this book shows, he never questioned the validity of his initial assumptions. For Savir, the path was set on the first of the 1,100 days that the Rabin/Peres government held office, and he never looked back. However, amidst the waves of suicide bombers, the Israeli public demanded more evidence that the process would indeed bring peace. In the elections of May 1996, Peres and Labor were voted out of office, and Savir's role in the negotiations ended.