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## Rabin, Presidential Transition, the Syrian Pocket, and Oslo

TODAY, YITZHAK RABIN IS seen in Israel and throughout the Middle East as a hero. Nearly all Israelis believe his assassination marked one of the darkest moments in Israeli history. In July 1992 when he became Prime Minister, he was not a hero, just a leader who was seen as ushering in an era of possibility. For us, he offered a welcome relief from the frustrations of dealing with Yitzhak Shamir.

Secretary Baker traveled to the Middle East to meet with Rabin on July 19, shortly after the new Prime Minister had established a government. The Rabin government was a center-left government, consisting of the Labor Party, the leftist-dovish Meretz party, and also a religious party, Shas, made up of Jews who had come from Morocco and the Arab world. The Shas leadership was more preoccupied with its religious schools and social services than with the peace process per se. But in representing those who had grown up in the Arab world and who were generally less trusting of the Arabs and less willing to make concessions to them, Shas took a harder line on questions related to peace. Notwithstanding Shas' position, it became clear very quickly in our meetings that we were dealing with a very different Israeli government and with a very different leader. Unlike Shamir, Rabin was not interested in expanding Israel's hold on the West Bank and Gaza, and he was interested in seeing if a deal was possible with Syria. Emotionally, he was not ready to deal with the PLO and Arafat, but he signaled that Israel's approach to the Palestinians had to change.

Rabin was not ready to get into specifics with Baker. It was simply too early, particularly as he was still expanding his governing coalition and he had not yet had time to formulate his plans. But he was eager to resolve the loan guarantee issue. In his initial meeting with Baker, he made clear that he was determined to shift priorities away from building settlements in the territories; to that end he was going to cancel seven thousand contracts on settlement housing units, and also end the Likud policy of providing monetary incentives to those who would move into the territories. Baker's reaction initially was to get into a negotiation and insist on more from Rabin for the loan guarantees. After that first meeting, Rabin, who had not yet moved into the Prime Minister's residence and was staying, as we were, at the King David Hotel, got onto an elevator that I had been riding alone. In his deep, somber voice he said, "Dennis, tell the Secretary that he is dealing with a different Yitzhak now."

I told Baker of the encounter, observing that he "feels you are treating him as if he is Yitzhak Shamir, not Yitzhak Rabin." Baker got the message, and though we did not resolve the loan guarantee issue, we set the stage for doing so during Rabin's planned visit to the Bush summer home in Kennebunkport in August.

Instead of returning home with Baker at the conclusion of the trip, I returned to Israel from Saudi Arabia to give a speech at Tel Aviv University. Rabin asked to see me privately, and I went to see him at the Defense Ministry, which, unlike other key ministries, is located in Tel Aviv, not Jerusalem. He was both Prime Minister and Defense Minister. It was Friday afternoon, nearly Shabbat, and we sat alone for over an hour drinking a couple of beers.

Rabin was relaxed and unusually expansive. In response to my questions about his priorities on peace, he became both strategic about the imperative of succeeding and steely in his determination (even chilling in terms of what it would take) to overcome inevitable internal opposition.

The strategic imperative: Israel would never be in a stronger position than it was today; militarily it was more powerful than ever and the United States had transformed the region. But within a decade, if Israel did not capitalize on the current favorable conditions, it could face grave dangers from Iran or possibly a resurgent Iraq—each of which might acquire unconventional military capabilities. It was necessary to transform the Middle East before that could happen.

The steely determination: he said he was prepared to do what was necessary, even though he anticipated violent opposition from the Israeli settlers. While he was not speaking of total withdrawal from the West Bank, he clearly was contemplating significant withdrawal from territory and settlements. His determination to proceed was driven by his conviction that his generation—the fighters for the creation of Israel—

had an obligation to pass on to the next generation the possibility of living in peace. His confidence that he could overcome the internal opposition, violent as it might turn out to be, stemmed from the IDF's support for his actions.

He told me that the entire leadership of the IDF was made up of his "boys." They had been with him throughout their careers, he had promoted them, they were the best the military could produce, and "they are completely loyal to me." I asked, "It sounds like you are talking about civil war—do you really believe that you will face something that extreme from the settlers and others?" He was unequivocal in his response: "Yes, and that is why it is so important that I have people I can count on" in the IDF. He took a long swallow of beer and concluded with, "It will get ugly." Ironically, three years later when it was very ugly, he failed to take the threats against him seriously.

#### | WHO WAS YITZHAK RABIN? |

In describing Yitzhak Rabin in his memoirs, Henry Kissinger wrote, "Taciturn, shy, reflective, almost resentful of small talk, Rabin possessed few of the attributes commonly associated with diplomacy," adding, "I grew extremely fond of him though he did little to encourage affection."

Few who knew Rabin would disagree with Kissinger's observation. Yet I would often see a softer side of Rabin. To be sure, it was never directed at me. Rather, I would see it directed at his wife, Leah, or their family. On Shabbat afternoons, he would often invite me to his home in Tel Aviv—a two-story apartment with a garden on the roof of the building. While with me he was all business, he would relax when his family was present. He would reveal his softer side when Leah might knock on the door of his study to see whether we wanted anything. No matter what we were discussing at the time, his look would change; with his glance at her, his demeanor, even his tone, would soften. It was the same with his children, and especially his grandchildren.

His demeanor otherwise was straightforward, even gruff and blunt. He had no time for and little interest in small talk.

His was a first-class mind. More than any leader I have dealt with, Rabin was an analyst. His thinking was structured and highly organized. He would summarize in a staccato fashion what were the regional developments as he saw them. He might offer four or five points to capture the strategic reality, always presenting them in sequence and literally saying first, second, third, fourth, and fifth.

He respected leaders who were tough and straightforward. Even before we began the negotiations with the Syrians, he had a great deal of respect for Hafez al-Asad, whom he found tough but true to his word. He drew much from the experience of negotiating the 1974 disengagement agreement with Syria through Henry Kissinger's

shuttle. Rabin believed that reaching any agreement with Asad would be extraordinarily difficult, but if reached, Asad would live up to it, just as he had with the 1974 agreement. Rabin often reminded me that Asad never allowed a single terrorist act to be launched against Israel from the Golan Heights and that Asad also observed limits in Lebanon, "Israel's redlines," about where Syrian forces could and could not be located.

He saw Yasir Arafat very differently. He held Arafat responsible for countless acts of terror, the most egregious in his eyes being the grisly attack in 1974 on Ma'alot in which twenty-six people were killed, nearly all of them children. Terror made Arafat an implacable foe for Rabin. Arafat's equivocation and lying—as Rabin saw them—rendered him someone unworthy of respect.

And yet by the summer of 1995 Rabin was to compare Asad unfavorably to Arafat, telling me, "At least Arafat is prepared to do things that are difficult for him. Asad wants everything handed to him and he wants to do nothing for it." For Rabin, the measure of leadership was a readiness to make difficult decisions. It was also the measure of seriousness about peace. He had to take steps that were very hard for him, practically and emotionally. He wanted to know that those he was negotiating with were prepared to do likewise. Rabin was not one to rush to decisions. But he was also not one who would avoid them. He simply knew the consequences of rash behaviors, and so would never be pushed into doing something before he was ready.

Growing up, he had not envisioned a life as a warrior. He studied water engineering, and one time at his home he took great pride in describing to Secretary Christopher, me, and others the automated watering system he had designed for his roof garden. But security and Israel's War of Independence transformed his life. He joined the elite commandos of the Palmach at the age of nineteen in 1941, and became its deputy commander under Yigal Allon in 1947. He commanded the Harel Brigade during the War of Independence and fought in the defense of Jerusalem, keeping the road open to break the siege of the city and helping preserve at least the western part of Jerusalem under the new state of Israel's control.

I never met a more secular Israeli. But for Rabin Jerusalem remained the soul of Israel. One time with me he was indignant over right-wing critics accusing him of being soft on Jerusalem because he was resisting pressures to increase the Jewish Israeli presence in the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem: "No one can preach to me about Jerusalem," he said. "I fought for it, I made sure we liberated it, and I will not surrender it."

While there was no ambiguity about his position on Jerusalem, he often saw the world in shades of gray. It was not just that he could come up with artful compromises like, for example, the "dual addressees," which suggested that Rabin knew that compromises on Jerusalem itself might be necessary. It was also that he would adjust to realities no matter how painful they might be.

There is no better example of that than his readiness to deal with the PLO. To do that, he had to overcome his own deep misgivings. But Rabin was a practical man, and his public explanations reflected that. "What can we do? Peace you don't make with friends, but with very unsympathetic enemies. I won't try to make the PLO look good. It was an enemy, it remains an enemy, but negotiations must be with enemies."

His practicality was always informed by his power of analysis. His analysis might well run ahead of his politics; indeed, he would not allow his analysis to be distorted by political considerations even though he might not act on his analysis because of political considerations. Again, his approach to the PLO is a good example. In March of 1993, he held an "analytical" breakfast with the new Clinton administration's Middle East specialists to go over regional developments and prospects. Over the meal, he gave a compelling explanation of why no Palestinian leader from the territories would ever have the authority to make commitments or deliver on them, and why Israel would have to deal with those who had such authority, wherever they were based.

Several of us asked the obvious question: Aren't you saying that you will have no choice but to deal with the PLO? Rabin demurred; though his analysis logically led to this conclusion, he was not ready to embrace it. The politics of Israel at that juncture ruled it out, and Rabin the cautious pragmatist was not ready to break the taboo on direct talks with the PLO. Rather, he still hoped to avoid this by, in effect, breaking another taboo and having Faisal Husseini, a Jerusalemite, become the head of the Palestinian delegation to talks with the Israelis—but he wanted us to propose this idea.

If Faisal were the head of the delegation, Jerusalem would be on the agenda. There was no ambiguity here; Faisal was a Jerusalemite, who had a political preoccupation with preserving East Jerusalem for the Palestinians. Rabin the pragmatist could deal with this if it was an American idea and it allowed him to see if there was an alternative to the PLO.

Following that breakfast, knowing Rabin as I did, I knew it was only a matter of time before Israel would begin to negotiate with the PLO. Two months later, when it became clear that even someone of Faisal's stature did not have the authority to negotiate, Rabin authorized negotiations with the PLO through a back channel. With Rabin, one always needed to pay attention to his analysis. Sooner or later his behavior would reflect it.

Rabin trusted his own assessments more than those of others. He drew information from others, and it was possible to influence him if you could do so before he had thought an issue through. Once he had made his analysis, though, you would not move him; only events would. For example, Rabin's analysis told him that it was both possible and desirable to do a deal with Asad before doing one with Arafat. When it be-

came clear that this was not the case, Rabin turned to Arafat; he did not give up on a deal with Asad, but he altered his assessment accordingly.

Rabin was very much an intellectual loner. He compartmentalized information, sharing it sparingly; he never shared the private commitment he had made to us on withdrawal from the Golan Heights with anyone on his side except Itamar Rabinovich, his negotiator and ambassador to the United States, so that when Shimon Peres became Prime Minister, he was surprised by it and Ehud Barak still questioned it even years later, telling us that he did not believe Rabin would ever have kept something so vital from him.

He trusted few people completely, but if he trusted you he would take you into his confidence on what he believed you needed to know. Over the years, he shared highly sensitive views with me—in part because I never betrayed a confidence, in part because I would ask him searching questions and would not simply accept his assessments without offering my own—and no doubt in part because he saw me as instrumental to the process.

His basic trust in himself, in his judgment, provided him with an inner calm in the midst of the storms raging around him. While his political enemies would from time to time whisper scurrilously about his "nervous collapse" of May 23, 1967, the scuttlebutt never had resonance or credibility in Israel because he resumed command prior to the Six-Day War in June and was its unquestioned architect.\* Maybe his inner confidence stemmed from his life's experience. He had faced all the trauma of war; he had helped forge Israel's defenses and masterminded its successes in battle; he had buried his close friends and borne the tragic news to their families; he had transformed the Israeli military and the country; he had been Prime Minister before and dealt with the world's leaders from the 1970s onward. There was little he had not seen, and his logical mind told him to maintain perspective and a clear mind in a crisis.

On more than one occasion, I went to see him in the Prime Minister's office in the immediate aftermath of a suicide bombing in Israel. The outer office would be in turmoil, with the press hounding his assistants for answers, his military secretary scurrying around to get updates, and cabinet ministers gathering to meet him and settle on a response. But in his office it would be quiet and he would exude calm. He might be angry, but rarely showed it. He might be uncertain as to his course of action, but never conveyed any doubt.

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\*Rabin collapsed on May 23 from exhaustion, pressure, and, as he later suggested, from too much nicotine and too little food.

In January 1995, for example, after a double suicide bombing killed twenty Israeli soldiers and a civilian at a bus stop at Beit Lid, Rabin was steady as could be. The country was traumatized; the soldiers (all aged eighteen to twenty-one) had been returning from leave and pictures of them led the news broadcasts. Amid the uproar, Rabin calmly asked me to convey a specific set of security demands to Arafat, and a very clear message: If you don't deal with those responsible, we will. He made it clear he would not conduct any further negotiations with Arafat until Arafat assumed his responsibilities on security, and then said to me, "Peace will not be possible until Arafat has his own *Altalena*."

In 1948, during the first UN truce adopted to try to stop the fighting between the newly declared state of Israel and all of its neighbors, a ship, the *Altalena*, departed southern France transporting a large number of volunteers for the Irgun and 5,000 rifles and 270 light machine guns. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion wanted the arms and the volunteers to be integrated into the new unified Israel Defense Forces. Menachem Begin, hoping to preserve the Irgun as a fighting force separate from the Israeli army, rejected this. For Ben-Gurion, there could be only one authority: "Jewish independence will not endure if every individual group is free to establish its own military force and to determine political facts affecting the future of the State." Ben-Gurion ordered the Irgun to hand the ship over to the Israeli army. When they refused, he ordered Israeli forces to take the ship; in the ensuing firefight, the ship was sunk, and more than thirty members of the Irgun were killed. The commander of the Israeli forces was Yitzhak Rabin.

He was no stranger to tough decisions, no pushover in political infighting. If he gave you his word, he would keep it, even if the circumstances changed and it was very difficult for him to do so. Later, as we will see, he felt he had made a mistake in what he committed to us on the Golan Heights, but he would not retreat from his commitment.

His word defined him. He would not lie. He might tell what I coined the "technical truth"—something that was technically true but actually misleading—to preserve secrecy on sensitive issues, but even here the right question would elicit the truth.

Yitzhak Rabin was for me the embodiment of the Israeli experience. He was close to the land, blunt in his demeanor, personally fearless—a warrior by necessity but desirous of a different life for his children and their generation. He was a man preoccupied with history, always thinking about the possibilities of change for both better and worse. His last words to me were strangely prophetic: "Dennis," he said, "expect anything."

#### | THE TRANSITION FROM BUSH TO CLINTON |

When President Bush asked Secretary Baker to go to the White House, Baker insisted that I go as well. I was not enthusiastic, feeling the main issues in the campaign would be domestic and that my own philosophy put me far closer to the themes Clin-

ton would be emphasizing than to the traditional Republican themes certain to guide the Bush efforts.

Baker, however, wanted his team around him. I did not feel I could say no to him. I felt I owed both the Secretary and the President a great deal. They had invested in me, giving me extraordinary responsibilities for shaping our policies on the Soviet Union and toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. And I also had enormous respect for President Bush, believing that he had guided the country and the world through tumultuous times—the end of the Cold War, the demise of the Soviet Union, and the undoing of the Iraqi absorption of Kuwait—with skill, insight, and great personal strength. So there could be no question of my saying no to Baker's request to go to the White House with him for the campaign.

I asked only that I be allowed to return to the State Department following the election, regardless of its outcome, believing I could have a greater effect on the transition that way. After Bill Clinton defeated George Bush in November 1992, I returned to State. I did not expect to be asked to stay. Working with the new Secretary, Larry Eagleburger, to whom I had become close over the years, I set about shaping the briefings that would be given to the new team. As it turned out, I was able not only to do that but also to work closely with him on the final stages of the START 2 negotiations as well.

The Clinton transition team did ask me to give them briefings, and then in early January Brian Atwood (the head of the State Department transition team) and Peter Tarnoff (who would become the Undersecretary for Political Affairs) asked if I would be willing to stay for a three-to-six-month transition period to help the new administration. They were not precise either about what I would be asked to do or about the position from which I would be doing it.

I knew that my friend Martin Indyk, who was involved in the transition and would become the senior Middle East advisor on the National Security Council staff, was also pushing to have me stay. He was keeping me informed of appointments to senior positions as well.

Sandy Berger was shaping the NSC staff at the White House. While I had known Sandy from our days working in the McGovern presidential campaign, I knew there was considerable opposition to my being asked to stay. After all, I had gone to the White House with Baker. My purpose there was to defeat Clinton. The Democrats had been out of power for twelve years; I had been with the Republicans; it was time to reward the faithful, not to keep representatives of the other side.

In Washington such arguments are rarely made in private. Journalist friends of mine would tell me what they were hearing. My reaction: I don't expect to stay; if I am asked, I will consider it. In fact, I had resolved that if asked, I would stay. My reasoning was that I had done so much to produce negotiations between Arabs and Israelis

that I did not want the transition to a new administration to risk those negotiations. And beginning in December, there was a troublesome break in the negotiations.

In response to several acts of terror, Yitzhak Rabin ordered the deportation of four hundred Hamas activists across the border into Lebanon. While this deportation was not to be permanent, Rabin (strongly supported by his military Chief of Staff, Ehud Barak) believed that such deportations could be an effective deterrent to terror. Palestinians did not want to be uprooted from their land and villages, and if they persisted in violence they would be. If they “behaved themselves,” they would be permitted to return in a year or two.

I told them it was a dubious proposition. But ultimately it was not the plan that failed Rabin and Barak; it was the failure to anticipate that the Lebanese would not simply absorb the deportees. On the contrary, the Lebanese government announced that they were an Israeli responsibility and would not let them move from the area in which they had been deposited, just across the Israeli border in southern Lebanon. There, in a no-man’s-land, the four hundred deportees were stuck. Televised around the world, their plight became a new grievance against Israel, and Palestinians declared a suspension of the negotiations until the deportees were allowed to return home.

The new Clinton administration would have to contend with this in its first days. I felt a need to help. In the week prior to the inauguration, Peter Tarnoff approached me again and said that the new Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, would like me to stay on as a “Special Advisor” for six months, to give him advice principally on the Middle East. I would stay in my office down the inner corridor from the Secretary’s, send my memos directly to Secretary Christopher, and see him if I felt it necessary. I would also be included in all Middle East policy discussions.

Over the course of the first few months of the Clinton administration, then, I offered advice, was among those who briefed the President before his March meeting with Rabin, and accompanied Secretary Christopher on his first trip to the Middle East. But I underestimated what it would be like to be a kibitzer after having been in the center of the action, as one of the most trusted advisors of the Secretary and the key point of contact for leaders and advisors from other countries. Now others had the responsibility to carry out the policies—even though I might be able to affect those policies with my ideas. But this too was not satisfying as often those ideas were distorted in their implementation.

Inescapably, I was on the periphery because I had come from the other camp. It is human nature to trust those who have labored with you in life’s battles. Political campaigns are crucibles of group definition. The choices are clear; the battle lines are drawn; winning and losing have a consequence; passion and exhausting effort forge a common sense of mission and extraordinary personal bonds.

After four months in the Christopher State Department, while feeling I had been treated very fairly, I also felt isolated. Though I had come to respect Secretary Christopher and had developed a close relationship with his Chief of Staff, Tom Donilon, I decided it made sense to leave. I told the Secretary I would like to leave by May 1; feeling that we were still in a difficult period, he asked if I would remain until June 15, and I reluctantly agreed to do so.

Tom Donilon had other ideas. Tom was the person closest to Warren Christopher. He’d come from the Secretary’s law firm, O’Melvany and Meyers, had been intimately involved in the Clinton campaign, and was respected by all the key White House advisors. Although he belittled his own foreign policy expertise, he was very smart, an unusually quick study, and a voracious reader. Moreover, he quickly demonstrated both intuition and good judgment—attributes that are typically more important than narrow expertise. Given what I had done in the Bush administration, Tom was always keen to talk to me about broad lessons learned in dealing with the Russians, security issues in Europe, the imbroglio in the former Yugoslavia, as well as the Middle East.

Convinced I should not leave, Tom explored ways to have me stay, including the creation for me of a new Undersecretary of State position on regional conflicts. I was flattered, but not interested. Every time he would bring up my staying, I would change the subject. Finally he asked me, “What is the one position you could not say no to?”

I told him I could not say no to being the chief U.S. negotiator on Arab-Israeli peace. “But forget it,” I said, because “to satisfy me you would have to upset the whole bureaucratic structure. The Near Eastern Affairs Bureau (NEA) has the lead now, and Ed Djerejian and his team will not want to accept a situation where I run things. The Secretary does not need the trouble.” I thought that would end the story, but I underestimated Tom and Secretary Christopher.

It is not often that one is called away from one’s going-away party to be asked to stay. But that is what happened. I was scheduled to leave on June 15. In the midst of a party thrown for me by my former staff from the Policy Planning Staff, I was called down to see Peter Tarnoff, who informed me that the Secretary, then away in Europe, had asked me to become our negotiator for the Arab-Israeli conflict. I would have my own office, report only to him, and use NEA for support whenever and for whatever I felt necessary.

Does NEA know this? I asked. Knowing about bureaucratic instincts, I fully expected NEA to resist the Secretary’s decision. (I would have, if I had been in Ed’s position.) I wanted to be sure that the Secretary would stick with his decision in the face of that resistance. The last thing I needed was to make the decision to stay and then find that because of bureaucratic angst the ground rules would be modified to accommodate the NEA concerns—and I told Peter this. Peter told me Ed had not yet been in-

formed, but if he was not comfortable with the new arrangement, he would be offered the ambassadorship in Israel.

Peter assured me this was a final decision: the Secretary wanted me to be his negotiator for the Middle East. There would be no question about my authority either within the State Department or outside it. The Secretary had obtained the President's approval.

I agreed, and shortly received a call from Secretary Christopher telling me he was "thrilled" I was staying, and was confident that in my new position I would make a difference on the Middle East.

To say I was surprised would be an understatement. True, I had told Tom Donilon what it would take for me to stay, but I never expected this. Suddenly I was no longer a kibitzer. I now had the responsibility to make something of the peace process once again.

#### | THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION'S MIND-SET ON THE MIDDLE EAST |

The Clinton administration did not come to the Middle East generally or the Arab-Israeli conflict specifically with a strong orientation. Initially, Warren Christopher, like James Baker before him, saw dangers in getting bogged down in endless and nonproductive Middle East talks, and told Lawrence Eagleburger that he would not fall into that trap.

He was also sensitive to the political minefields of Arab-Israeli diplomacy. He got wind of unease about him in the Jewish community, where it was felt that Christopher, having been the Deputy Secretary of State during the Carter administration, shared Jimmy Carter's approach—that he would be too quick to criticize Israel, too inclined to be responsive to the Arabs, and too open to the PLO and Yasir Arafat. Senator Joseph Lieberman hosted a meeting for Secretary-designate Christopher with Jewish leaders in which Christopher made clear his commitment to a strong Israel and to an open-door policy with Jewish leaders. If there were openings for Arab-Israeli peace, he would be ready to pursue them. But he was not going to be active in trying to create openings if they were not there.

The new National Security Advisor, Anthony Lake, had not been a particularly close observer of the Middle East. He saw little need for presidential activism there, and he felt the Middle East should be the Secretary of State's preserve.

Tony appointed Martin Indyk his lead specialist on the Middle East on the National Security Council staff. Tony and his deputy, Sandy Berger, had arranged for Martin to brief candidate Clinton, then President-elect Clinton, on the Middle East. Martin, highly thoughtful and articulate, was a devotee of a "Syria-first" strategy, be-

lieving that Syria would affect the regional dynamics, and that the Palestinians, especially the Palestinians in the territories, would not.

The Palestinians could make life uncomfortable for Israelis, but not threaten their existence. Syria, with its conventional and unconventional forces, could. Settling the conflict with the Syrians would give Israel a "circle of peace." Jordan, not feeling threatened by Syria or its rejectionist clients, would follow Syria's lead, Lebanon too, and suddenly Israel would be at peace with all of its neighboring states. This would influence the Saudis and the Gulf states, insulate Israel from more distant threats from Iraq and Iran, and provide great leverage over the Palestinians. Knowing the other Arab states had a stake in peace with Israel, the Palestinians would find little support for hard-line positions, making an agreement more likely even on the most existential questions—or so the logic of the Syria-first approach went.

Of course, while the Syria-first approach reflected Rabin's preferred strategy—and certainly influenced the Clinton administration's orientation at its inception—reality does not always conform to preferred strategies. And that was certainly the case in the early days of the Clinton administration.

In its first week, it was not Syria that preoccupied the administration, but the issue of the Hamas deportations that had been raised at the UN Security Council. Suddenly Secretary Christopher had to contend with a number of questions: How to avoid problems at the UN, particularly in the Security Council? How to get the negotiations resumed again? How not to get off to a rocky start either substantively or politically on Arab-Israeli issues?

To overcome the deportation issue, Christopher took a trip to the region from February 18–25, far earlier than he might have, and reached an understanding with Rabin that permitted some of the deportees to return immediately and the rest to return over the period of a year. That paved the way for a resumption of negotiations in Washington on all the tracks.

Several weeks later, Rabin came to Washington, hoping to focus on the Syrian track. But a series of terrorist stabbings in Jerusalem prompted him to cut his trip short.

It was on this trip that Rabin suggested including Faisal Husseini on the Palestinian team as a way of breathing life into those negotiations. On the Syrian track, little progress proved possible as the Syrians in Washington insisted that Israel must first commit to full withdrawal from the Golan before Syria could make any comments about peace with Israel.\*

\*As a compromise between the Israelis, who wanted the talks in the Middle East, and the Arabs, who wanted them to remain in Spain, we proposed that the bilateral talks initiated in Madrid would continue in Washington.



Shortly after Rabin had become Prime Minister, he had reversed Shamir's policy that resolution 242 did not apply to the Golan Heights. This meant that in theory Israel was willing to withdraw from the Golan, but Rabin felt the scope of that withdrawal must be a major topic for the negotiations. For their part, the Syrians responded to the Israeli change on 242 by being willing to engage in discussions of a framework agreement, but they would not begin to give it content or speak about peace unless the Israelis committed to full withdrawal.

During this time, prior to my becoming the negotiator, Ed Djerejian was managing our effort in the Washington talks, and given his background as former ambassador to Syria, he spent most of his time on this track. To break the stalemate, he tried to see if the Syrians would engage on the basis of hypotheticals—e.g., assume you get full withdrawal, how would you respond on peace and security—but this effort too was unavailing. The Syrian negotiators would not budge.

Similarly, no headway was being made in the Palestinian negotiations. Even after Faisal Husseini was made the head of the delegation, Arafat imposed his authority by having Husseini spend his time in Tunis rather than in Washington with the delegation. The signal to the Israelis was clear. You can talk with those in Washington, but you will get nothing done unless you deal with us here—meaning the PLO.

Rabin, at least as far as I was aware, had not yet made the decision to deal with the PLO. At this point, we had no dialogue with the PLO either, having suspended it back in June 1990 over an act of terror.\* We could hardly reengage with the PLO and we were thus left with little room to maneuver. In my initial move as negotiator, I tried to give this track a push by having the Israelis agree to the concept of “early empowerment.” In particular, I wanted the Israelis to agree to turn over functional power to the Palestinians in the areas of education, health, welfare, tourism, and taxation, feeling that it might demonstrate to Palestinians that change was possible. But neither side showed much enthusiasm for this idea—with the Palestinians feeling it did not address what they wanted, namely, jurisdiction over the land, and the Israelis not wanting to cede any powers unless the Palestinians gave up the idea of having jurisdiction.

So as I entered the process as our negotiator, the situation, even with a Labor government, looked similar to the way it had during Shamir's time. But there was one very important piece of the situation that I did not fully grasp—and that was Oslo.

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\*At that time, Abul Abbas, a member of the Executive Committee of the PLO, had been responsible for an attempted act of terror in Tel Aviv. Arafat had not been willing either to condemn the act or to expel Abbas from the Executive Committee, our two conditions for not suspending the U.S.-PLO dialogue.

## | THE OSLO PROCESS |

Even before the Israeli elections in 1992, the Norwegians had sought to establish a back channel between Israelis and the PLO. Because of the Israeli law forbidding Israeli officials from contacting official members of the PLO, meetings in academic settings or conferences were acceptable; more formal meetings were not. Terje Larsen headed the Oslo-based Institute for Applied Social Science (its Norwegian acronym was FAFO). Terje and others, like Marianne Heiberg, wife of the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Johan Jørgen Holst, had done studies for FAFO on life in the West Bank. Their work had brought them in contact with many Palestinians and Israelis and built a strong commitment to trying to promote peace.

Terje was a great believer in creating informal channels of communication, and in 1992 his preoccupation was setting up a back channel between Yossi Beilin, a leading dove in the Labor Party who was a close disciple of Shimon Peres, and Faisal Husseini, who (unbeknownst to Terje) had been meeting discreetly already.

In early December of 1992, Ahmed Qurei of the PLO (better known by his Palestinian patronym of Abu Ala), was in London to informally coordinate Palestinian participation in the multilateral negotiations launched the previous January. Yair Hirschfeld, an Israeli academician, had close ties to Palestinians in the territories and had been urged to meet with Abu Ala in London. Hirschfeld asked Larsen if he would arrange a meeting and Hirschfeld and Abu Ala met twice in London.

Yossi Beilin, who had been appointed as Deputy Foreign Minister under Shimon Peres, was also in London, leading the Israeli delegation to the multilaterals. Hirschfeld, without revealing that he had already met with Abu Ala, asked Yossi for permission to meet Abu Ala in Norway. Yossi approved the idea, and beginning in January of 1993 the Oslo channel was born.

For Yossi, this was a perfect opportunity to retain deniability, but also to test what PLO thinking might be. He had low expectations that these talks would lead anywhere, believing at most that they could generate ideas that might prove useful for breaking impasses in the Washington talks.

Hirschfeld brought fellow academic Ron Pundak to the talks. Abu Ala brought Maher el-Kurd, a longtime associate of his and a member of Arafat's office, as well as Hassan Asfour, a former Communist and close collaborator of Mahmoud Abbas—better known by his patronym Abu Mazen.

Abu Mazen, one of Arafat's earliest colleagues in Fatah, was a leading dove in the PLO, arguing for coexistence with Israel and the negotiation of a peace settlement. Though Abu Mazen would never directly take part in the Oslo discussions, Hassan Asfour was his eyes and ears in the discussions with Hirschfeld and Pundak.

In the first round of talks Hirschfeld and Abu Ala agreed on three ideas: Israeli withdrawal from Gaza; economic cooperation between the Palestinians and Israelis; and an international Marshall Plan for the “nascent Palestinian entity in Gaza.”

In Israeli eyes, this was a promising beginning. The Israelis wanted out of Gaza—an impoverished area with over a million Palestinians crammed into 360 square kilometers. (By comparison, the West Bank had double the population but in 5,860 square kilometers.)

Beilin briefed Peres, who briefed Rabin, who approved more talks. Still, Yossi Beilin believed that the talks could only yield real promise and real insight into PLO thinking if the two sides began to draft a declaration of principles (DOP) for the interim period. Abu Ala agreed to this.

The Israeli approach continued to be shaped by the Camp David agreement, calling for an interim period in which there would be autonomy for the Palestinians, followed by negotiations on the permanent status issues of Jerusalem, refugees, and borders. We, too, had embraced the logic of such an approach, actually embedding it in the invitation letter to Madrid. For their part, the Palestinians preferred going directly to permanent status, but adjusted to this basic approach—with the provisos of gaining real independence from the Israelis early and with statehood understood as the objective of the process.

In two rounds in February and March, Hirschfeld and Pundak and Abu Ala and Hassan Asfour came to an understanding on a six-page document. In it both sides made important moves. Israel would agree to withdraw completely from Gaza in two years (with a UN trusteeship to replace Israel); to negotiate the permanent status of Jerusalem; to permit the Palestinians of East Jerusalem to take part in the elections for self-rule throughout the territories; and to accept binding arbitration of disputes. The Palestinians revealed their flexibility more by what they did not say than by what they did. For the first time, they were ready to accept a document that did not provide explicit jurisdiction and control over the land; did not ensure that East Jerusalem would be part of the area of self-rule; and did not have guarantees on statehood.

In reality, this document seemed to contradict everything we knew about both sides' positions; and at the end of March, when the Norwegians shared the DOP drafted by Hirschfeld and Abu Ala with us, I found it hard to believe, especially on the Israeli side.

I knew that Rabin wanted out of Gaza, but doubted he would agree to dismantle settlements or include East Jerusalem in the self-rule areas at this stage. And there was no way that Rabin, of all people, would accept that disagreements with the Palestinians could be subject to outside and binding arbitration; he would not put Israel's fate in someone else's hands.

Naturally, the paper led us to doubt the seriousness and meaning of the channel. Sure enough, by May, when official Israelis became involved in the Oslo channel, they insisted that the passages about binding arbitration, the complete withdrawal from Gaza, and Palestinians running for and voting in elections in East Jerusalem all had to be changed.

Why did Rabin make the Oslo channel an official one? To begin with, he saw the Washington talks going nowhere, with Faisal in Tunis and the negotiators in Washington demanding that self-rule must provide not only for jurisdiction over the land but also for authority over the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. Worse, they would not accept exclusion of East Jerusalem from the self-rule arrangements and insisted on statehood being the acknowledged outcome of the negotiations.

Rabin believed his domestic realities required that he be able to say that he had preserved Israel's options for the future. He saw the interim period as one in which Palestinian intentions would be tested and both sides would learn to live together. That would make tackling the existential issues of the conflict possible over time.

With this in mind, he decided to test the Oslo channel, and, in effect, to test Arafat, by saying he would discontinue the channel unless Faisal Husseini took part so as to keep public attention on the Washington talks.

No doubt sensing that Rabin was undecided on the utility of the channel, Arafat responded to these Israeli demands and Abu Ala even went so far as to tell Hirschfeld in the fourth round of talks in April that East Jerusalem would be excluded from the area of self-rule. By May, however, having acceded to Israeli demands and seen very little in response, the Palestinians felt it was their turn to impose a demand. Abu Ala told Hirschfeld that either the Israelis upgrade the channel—to include official participation—or the Palestinians would no longer take part in it.

Now Rabin had to decide the future of this channel. He decided that Peres could send Uri Savir, the Director General of the Foreign Ministry, to participate in the talks. A major threshold was being crossed: Israel was officially dealing with the PLO, albeit in secret. There would be no more deniability.

Though Uri was to retreat from many of the positions Hirschfeld had taken and Abu Ala was to harden the Palestinian positions, these two would forge a bond that would ensure eventual agreement at Oslo. As I was to see later, Uri and Abu Ala each understood the other's fundamental commitment to peaceful coexistence. Whatever the difficulties they would face, whatever manipulations they would engage in for the sake of achieving their ends in negotiations—and no two negotiators have ever been better manipulators—they forged a bond of trust.

Abu Ala saw in Uri an Israeli who grasped Palestinian needs in human and political terms, who believed occupation was wrong, and who understood that Israel needed



to accept Palestinian national aspirations—provided the aspirations were not defined in a way that threatened Israel’s existence. Uri saw in Abu Ala a Palestinian who was a leading PLO official and close to Arafat, who was committed to peaceful coexistence with Israel, and who believed that the well-being of the Palestinians depended on it. The two struck an implicit bargain: “statehood for security.” Uri acknowledged that Palestinian national aspirations would need to be recognized ultimately; Abu Ala understood that Palestinian national needs could only be accepted if Israeli security needs were satisfied. Everything else could be worked out.

That is not to say the process of negotiating the Declaration of Principles was easy or without crisis and brinkmanship. Indeed, the norm in these and the negotiations that would follow over the next seven years was crisis and brinkmanship. The crisis in Oslo would come at the end of July when Abu Ala would provide twenty-six reservations—reservations that walked back Palestinian flexibility on nearly all the issues.

With the talks on the brink of collapse, Uri offered a basic trade-off: to get Abu Ala to give up the points Israel could not accept, Uri offered to push for formal and mutual recognition. Abu Ala knew that for Arafat mutual recognition would be the big achievement. His readiness to accept an interim period and a gradual process was probably always tied in his mind to the political gain of recognition and recognition inevitably meant acceptance of the PLO *raison d’être* of independent statehood.

While Rabin was not keen to give this away, Uri understood it was necessary to play the recognition card if the Palestinians were to accept all of Israel’s security needs, including Israeli jurisdiction over all Israelis in the West Bank and Gaza—and also agree to drop their demands on holding East Jerusalem elections, binding arbitration, total withdrawal from Gaza, and creating a Palestinian corridor between Gaza and Jericho.

Uri’s offer to push for mutual recognition broke the crisis and put them on a pathway to agreeing on the Declaration of Principles. I was to learn all of this in great detail later from Uri and Abu Ala—each of whom I became very close to. But as I readied myself for my first trip to the region as our envoy in the middle of July, I was unaware of how much they had discussed or that their talks were in crisis at this time.

However, I was aware that there were multiple contacts between Israelis and Palestinians who were either PLO representatives or had close ties to PLO leaders. Once the Knesset had lifted the ban on meetings between private Israeli citizens and members of the PLO, the channels proliferated: Shlomo Gazit, a former head of Israeli military intelligence, led a group who met with Palestinian academics to discuss security issues; Ephraim Sneh, formerly the Israeli administrator of the West Bank and Gaza, was apparently meeting with Nabil Sha’ath of the PLO. And, of course, there was the Oslo channel.

I felt my initial trip should be used to see if there was a way to foster movement

on both negotiating tracks. I would see what Rabin would tell me about contacts with the Palestinians, probe on any possible flexibility on the jurisdiction question, and use resistance on it to push early empowerment to create a new dynamic on the Palestinian track. On Syria, I would suggest Rabin let me convey a different type of message to Asad to see if that might allow us to generate a different Syrian response on the content of peace. Secretary Christopher approved my plan.

Martin Indyk, Aaron Miller, and Gamal Helal would accompany me on this and many subsequent trips. They became known as members of the peace team.

Martin Indyk, originally an academic from Australia, was the first executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. I met him before leaving to go to Berkeley and we became close friends. Martin is smart, eloquent, and passionate about America’s role in the Middle East. Our views on the Middle East tended to mesh closely. We were both strong believers in the strategic importance of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, convinced that Israeli deterrence and the possibility of peace depended on never allowing a wedge to be driven between America and Israel, and certain that the risks of pursuing peace were less than the risks of not pursuing it. We would work closely together in each of his positions in the Clinton Administration, first as special assistant to the President on the NSC staff, then as Ambassador to Israel, then as Assistant Secretary of State for the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau, and finally as Ambassador to Israel a second time. It was not unusual for Martin and me to speak four or five times daily, no matter where either of us was in the world. And, when I was in Israel, I would spend time with him before and after meetings, chewing over what was happening and what to do.

Aaron Miller would be my deputy. I had known him since the mid-1980s, and he had been on my staff in Policy Planning at the State Department. Aaron was a historian by training, and the author of several books, including one on Saudi Arabia. He brought great passion to the pursuit of Arab-Israeli peace. Like Martin and me, he was Jewish and in no small part that helped to shape his personal commitment to peace. He deeply believed in Israel’s moral legitimacy, while also understanding the profound sense of grievance that Palestinians felt. Perhaps, because of his training as a historian, Aaron always tried to evaluate what was going on in terms of basic trends. He would often say that this conflict evolved in stages and would only be settled in stages. He tended to be more risk averse than I, always seeing the value in the process, and fearing its alternative. He was also guided by his own sense of fairness, believing instinctively that the Palestinians should not be treated differently from any other Arab party. Aaron’s analysis was thoughtful, logical, and honest. One thing I knew for sure: With Aaron, I would have a deputy who would never shy away from expressing the truth as he understood it, no matter the audience.

Gamal Helal was born in Egypt and came to study in America when he was twenty. He had stayed, become an American citizen, and joined the State Department as an interpreter. We met for the first time the night before Secretary Baker's January 9, 1991 meeting in Geneva with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz; Gamal would be the interpreter in the meeting that was the last-gasp effort to produce Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait and avert war. Gamal knew the stakes for the meeting and, anxious to be precise, asked if I could show him the "talking points" Baker would use. Even though we were still working on them, I let him review them, and jokingly told him, "Hey, there's no pressure on you. You are a rookie and just treat this as the Super Bowl and World Series rolled into one. Don't worry, you will do fine." And, in fact, he did. From that time onward, he became the Secretary's and the President's lead Arabic interpreter in the Bush and Clinton Administrations. I came to appreciate Gamal's extraordinary talents and insights on the region and made him one of my senior advisors.

Over the course of the next several years others became members of the team: Mark Parris, when he took Martin's place at the NSC; Jonathan Schwartz, the deputy legal advisor in the State Department; Bruce Riedel, who replaced Mark Parris at the NSC; David Satterfield, when he served with Martin at the NSC and later in the Near Eastern Affairs Bureau; and, finally, Robert Malley, who worked with Bruce and had a particularly strong commitment to Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Three others bear special mention: Toni Verstandig, Nick Rasmussen, and Henrietta Mickens. Toni was a deputy assistant secretary in NEA. She had spent nearly two decades as a lead congressional staffer. She was savvy, energetic, and determined to get things done. She had an intuitive feel for economic development and played the leading role in our efforts to provide assistance to the Palestinians. Nick was my special assistant. He had a general background on security issues. He had worked for Bob Gallucci on the negotiations with North Korea, and when Gallucci was leaving the government, he called to tell me he was going to do me a great favor by suggesting I hire his aide, Nick Rasmussen. Bob was right—Nick was indispensable. From logistics to substance to highly sensitive assignments, Nick could do it all—tirelessly and with great skill. Finally, Henrietta ran my office. She did it with great professionalism and enormous dedication. Without Henrietta, I could not have done my job.

With this group of people in support of my efforts, I was now the point person for the Clinton administration on the Arab-Israeli peace process.\* I was given a wide man-

\*Secretary Christopher effectively deputized a number of individuals to be responsible for particular policy areas: Strobe Talbott was responsible for Russia and the newly independent states, later Richard Holbrooke became responsible for Bosnia, and I was responsible for the Arab-Israeli issues.

date by the Secretary and the President, and I could call on any part of the State, Defense, or CIA bureaucracies to support our approach to diplomacy. To manage our policy on a day-to-day basis, I would have a meeting at 10 a.m. every day in my office at the State Department. I did this not only to hash out what we should be doing but also to deal with any issue that needed to be addressed that day: guidance for the White House and State Department spokespersons; responses to congressional inquiries; finalizing talking points for presidential phone calls; conveying messages to our ambassadors in the field; reacting, as necessary, to overnight developments.

The meetings helped ensure bureaucratic cohesion and minimized my being blindsided by actions that one part of the bureaucracy might be taking in the region that could cut across the diplomacy I was responsible for conducting. At different times, depending on the needs of the negotiations, I would bring senior military officers representing the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to these meetings and on my trips. In 1995 and 1996 Lt. General Dan Christman played this role in the Syrian negotiations. Later, Lt. General "Doc" Foglesong assisted me in this manner on both tracks. Both men played an enormously helpful role in the diplomacy when called upon to do so. And the 10 a.m. meetings, always held when I was not in the region, became a focal point for responding to tactical needs and a continuing forum for intense discussion on what was happening in the region and whether it was validating our assumptions.

#### | JULY TRIP: EARLY RABIN SIGNALS |

Knowing Rabin, I had little expectation that he would reveal anything new in the larger group meeting with our respective delegations. That would have to wait for our private meeting.

In the larger meeting, the Prime Minister greeted me warmly and then proceeded to take a tough line, opposing any softening on the jurisdiction question. On Syria, he said there was nothing more he could do. He felt he had done his part and taken a risky step by announcing several months earlier that "the depth of withdrawal will reflect the depth of peace." He was being criticized in Israel for having signaled that he would be prepared for significant withdrawal without there being any change in Syria's negotiating posture. For Rabin, the ball was in Asad's court.

Our private meeting proved to be far more interesting. Once we had gone into his

Each of those so "deputized" had enormous independence and authority in their areas. When Madeleine became Secretary, she operated differently in general but not toward me.

inner office, just the two of us, I opened with Syria: What did he want me to convey to Asad? He thought a moment and asked, did I have anything in mind? I did. Why not let me say that “Prime Minister Rabin understands your needs. He knows if they aren’t met, if you aren’t satisfied on withdrawal, there will be no deal. He wants a deal, but he does not believe that you understand his needs. And just as your needs must be met, so must his be met if there is to be an agreement. How do you understand his needs and what would you like me to say about those needs in response to the Prime Minister?”

In a noncommitting and indirect fashion, I would be signaling on Rabin’s behalf that he knew there would be no deal without full withdrawal, and that he wanted a deal. At the same time, I was putting Asad in a position in which he would need to respond with a signal akin to the one Rabin was sending through me.

I did not need to spell this out for Rabin. He got it. He thought for a minute and then said, “It is okay for you to say that,” revealing no emotion or concern, even though I would be implying Israeli readiness for full withdrawal under certain circumstances.

Relaxed now, Rabin told me he wanted to show me something. He went over to his desk and returned with a handwritten letter, which he handed to me, saying I must tell no one but the President and the Secretary about it. The letter was from Arafat. He had fundamental doubts about Arafat, wondering whether he would ever really deliver. But in this letter (conveyed by the Egyptians from the PLO ambassador in Cairo), Arafat made clear he would defer all the sensitive issues, especially Jerusalem and jurisdiction, in order to reach an interim agreement.

If this was true, it signaled the possibility of progress with the PLO. Rabin said he would respond to the letter and test Arafat’s reaction to his answer.

When I asked about other discreet channels giving similar signals, he dismissed them. This, not the Oslo channel, seemed to be the one he took seriously.

As I left the office and headed to Syria, I realized that Rabin was testing on both tracks. Who would respond first, Asad or Arafat?

**MEETING WITH ASAD** • I met Asad not in Damascus but in his summer house along the Mediterranean Sea in Latakia. The climate was pleasant and the setting was beautiful. Somehow I could not envision Asad rollicking in the sea or taking hikes in the mountains above his sprawling house. But he must have relished the escape from the capital.

Asad, like Rabin, welcomed me. He had liked Baker, and admired his readiness to be tough on the Israelis. Having me as the envoy signaled the kind of continuity that Asad liked—links to those he took seriously and to those responsible for Madrid.

Our meeting was long and cordial. Knowing that Asad always wanted to settle into a meeting, I did not rush to the Rabin message. I set the stage for it, explaining why the President and the Secretary had made me the envoy and how they saw my role. I also wanted to wait until after Asad brought up the subject of Bush and Baker—something I knew he would do to remind me of his confidence in them and of the Madrid commitments.

I had to choreograph the meeting this way because I knew that if I raised the Rabin message prematurely or made too much of it, Asad would belittle it. Instead, I eased into it by talking about how both sides had needs, and no agreement could be reached unless the needs of both sides were satisfied—and the public opinion of both sides was addressed.\*

Asad nodded, saying, “This is correct.” Then I told him I had a message from the Prime Minister, which I then summarized. Asad listened carefully, then declared the message “useful.”

When I asked him to describe how he understood Rabin’s needs, he replied: “Rabin needs peace.” When I pressed him on what that meant in practical terms, he said, he needs “full peace; peace between neighbors.” He resisted being more precise. But he offered a formula, “full peace for full withdrawal”—his answer to Rabin’s “the depth of withdrawal will reflect the depth of peace.”†

Back in Jerusalem, I briefed Rabin, who saw little for Israel in the formula but found Asad’s response interesting enough to suggest that I return for another round of exchanging messages between himself and Asad in a couple of weeks.

I returned to Washington believing that on the Syrian track I was now involved in a diplomatic minuet that might offer a new direction to Israeli-Syrian negotiations. I had not made any real headway on the Palestinian track, but I believed the next step there should be Rabin’s response to the Arafat letter.

#### | LEBANON INTERVENES |

At the end of July, there was an eruption of violence in southern Lebanon between the Israeli military (IDF) and Hizbollah. Hizbollah killed a number of Israeli soldiers in Israel’s security zone in southern Lebanon; Israel retaliated against villages that Hizbollah operated from; and Hizbollah fired Katyusha rockets into northern Israel.

With the Israelis living in shelters in the north, Rabin and his military Chief of

\*Asad was forever lecturing Westerners who he felt discounted Arab public opinion.

†Shara had raised this formula once in public previously, but it had not been repeated.

Staff, Ehud Barak, were determined to deal a more decisive blow against Hizbollah's capability to disrupt life in northern Israel. To that end, Israel launched "Operation Accountability," a plan devised by Barak and approved by Rabin. If Israeli citizens in the north would have no peace from Hizbollah rockets, the thinking went, then Lebanese living in southern Lebanon would also know no peace. Except that in the Lebanese case, residents would be forced to leave their homes, triggering a mass exodus of Lebanese villagers from the south that would force the Lebanese government inevitably to plead with Asad to stop this kind of Hizbollah behavior—or so the plan presumed.

Logical, perhaps, but as I told Rabin in our first conversations as the fighting escalated, the Israeli campaign was based on a flawed assumption. Asad did not care if the Lebanese were suffering; moreover, he was surely pleased by a situation that put the onus on Israel internationally. With 250,000 Lebanese streaming toward Beirut in a human caravan, Asad saw only gains, not losses, in such a situation; and militarily the Israelis could not stop the Katyusha rockets without occupying all of southern Lebanon.\*

At the time, I was in Washington and Secretary Christopher was in Asia taking part in the annual ASEAN meetings. Though we were half a world apart, we spoke frequently and I was cabling the points to be used in the phone calls he was making to Rabin and Syrian Foreign Minister Shara.

Over the course of several days, we forged a set of verbal understandings that civilians on each side of the border would not be targeted. Once agreed, there would be a cease-fire. The main sticking point was that Syria would not commit to stopping Hizbollah attacks against Israeli forces in Israel's self-declared security zone in southern Lebanon. As Shara told the Secretary, Hizbollah had the right to resist the Israeli occupation in its country. The line was being drawn only on attacks against civilians by each side.

Rabin was initially reluctant to accept these ground rules for a cease-fire; but ever the realist, he knew he was not going to do better. He called me to say he would accept the terms but wanted to be clear on one point and certain that Syria accepted it: if Hizbollah would still be free to attack the IDF in Lebanon, Israeli forces would return fire against any source, even if the fire was coming from within villages, and such an action would not constitute a violation of the cease-fire. When Shara told us that President Asad accepted this point, we had a cease-fire agreement.

\*Rabin, as Defense Minister in 1985, had presided over the Israeli withdrawal from most of Lebanon and was not going to reenter now.

### | RABIN'S SECRET COMMITMENT ON THE GOLAN HEIGHTS |

In the first week of August, Secretary Christopher traveled to the region, mainly intending to see each leader and have them reaffirm the cease-fire terms face-to-face with him.

The Secretary and I were in for a surprise. In a private meeting—involving only Rabin, Itamar, the Secretary, and me—Rabin quickly moved beyond Lebanon and suggested that the cease-fire agreement might mean that Asad was ready for something larger and more strategic. Sometimes opportunities came out of crises. We should find out if there was an opportunity with Syria now.

He proposed to have us convey the following: He would be prepared to commit to the United States that Israel would withdraw fully from the Golan Heights provided Israel's needs were met and provided Syria's agreement was not contingent on any other agreement—such as an agreement between the Palestinians and Israelis. He went on to explain Israel's needs: (1) There must be normalization of relations, with full diplomatic relations and an exchange of ambassadors after the first phase of withdrawal. Withdrawal should be spread out over five years; (2) Full normalization required trade and tourism; (3) There must be satisfactory security arrangements, with the United States manning the early-warning sites in the Golan; (4) Israel's water needs must be safeguarded.

Rabin said that Asad should understand that what we were conveying had to remain absolutely confidential. If it leaked, he would deny it and withdraw it altogether.

If Asad could accept this, Rabin wanted to move quickly to agreement. Christopher asked if Rabin expected anything to happen with the Palestinians. Rabin was skeptical, making a cryptic reference to secret talks with the Palestinians but doubting they would lead anywhere. His focus was clearly on Syria, not the Palestinians.

In retrospect, I believe that Rabin still doubted that Arafat would deliver in the end through the Oslo channel. But before finding out, Rabin wanted to know whether a breakthrough with Asad was possible. In his mind, he could not do both; the public could not absorb two such shocks—a commitment to withdraw fully from the Golan and a deal with the PLO—at the same time.

**SEEING ASAD IN DAMASCUS** • Given the sensitivity of the Rabin message, we arranged a private meeting with Asad, with only the Secretary and myself on our side and Asad's Foreign Minister, Farouk al-Shara, and his new interpreter, Butheina Sha'aban, joining Asad.

When we conveyed the Rabin message, Asad made no effort to belittle it. "Very important," he said, clearly aware that he was hearing an explicit commitment to full withdrawal for the first time. He then offered a qualified response: he did not like the

term “normalization” (he preferred “normal peaceful relations”); he could not mandate trade or tourism, but he would not block them either. He accepted that satisfactory security arrangements would be required, but said this was a mutual interest. Water was also important for both sides, not only one.

Finally, he accepted that a Syrian agreement would not be dependent on a final deal with the Palestinians—but stressed his expectation that Rabin would seek at least a partial deal. I explained that that was what the Israelis and Palestinians were currently trying to negotiate, and he nodded approvingly.

When the Secretary repeated that Rabin had to know that Asad would not condition an agreement with Israel on any other agreement, Asad said Syria would proceed to reach agreement with Israel but he did require an Israeli-Lebanese agreement at the same time. In a classic bit of understatement, he said he did not foresee any difficulties in reaching an agreement between the Lebanese and the Israelis if a deal with Syria had been concluded. Rabin, he said, understood Syria’s special relations with Lebanon, so here again he anticipated no problems with the Israelis on his tying his agreement to the Lebanese.

It is noteworthy that later, after the Oslo agreement was disclosed, Asad justified making his own deal with the Israelis on the grounds that the Palestinians had left him. But, in fact, he was ready to make his own deal from the beginning. He was willing to leave the Palestinians out in the cold, but not the Lebanese.

Now Asad raised a problem. In 1974, in the Disengagement Agreement, it had taken the Israelis twenty-two days to withdraw, so why, he asked, did Rabin now say five years was necessary for withdrawal? Though the Secretary and I pointed out that the two agreements were different—one interim and limited, one final and total—the Secretary said we would ask for an explanation.

But Asad could not bring himself to say more. I believe he foresaw tough negotiating ahead, and he saw little reason to give Rabin leverage in the negotiation. Asad, much like us, did not appreciate that the Israelis and PLO were on the brink of a breakthrough. Even had he known, I doubt he would have changed his posture.

Asad was never one to move in leaps. His response was not historic in nature. But it would have been out of character for him to respond differently.

Rabin was hoping for more. In his eyes, Asad’s response did not signal a readiness to move quickly to a peace agreement. Rabin found the Asad response minimal and said so. He did not seem troubled by Asad’s qualifiers; he even answered Asad’s question on the timetable for withdrawal, contending it would take four to five years to build new housing in Israel for the Israelis forced to leave the Golan Heights. Smiling, he said, “I could do it in less time if he is willing to allow Israelis living there to remain under Syrian sovereignty.”

For all that, he was prepared to start a private negotiation with the Syrians, provided it involved only one Syrian with Itamar. Even then, the Syrian representative would not hear from Itamar what was given to us. But the process of negotiating an agreement could begin.

So Warren Christopher and I returned to Damascus and summarized Rabin’s response to Asad. It was Asad’s turn to smile; sardonically, he replied, “First you want me to let the Jews leave and now you want them to remain.”\*

Asad listened carefully as we described Rabin’s unwillingness to convey what he had put in our pocket directly to the Syrians at this stage. From this time onward, Rabin’s conditional offer on full withdrawal became referred to as the “pocket.”

Asad raised no objections, except that he preferred to have two negotiators on his side and wanted to be sure that I would host the negotiations. This, I noted, would make Rabin nervous about a possible disclosure of the “pocket.”

Asad’s response was both chilling and convincing: Anyone who would leak the pocket would hurt Syria’s national interest, and all Syrians knew what the consequences were for “hurting” Syria’s national interest.

Clearly, Asad wanted more than one person on his side. The reason, I assumed, was to keep his negotiator honest and to ensure that he was informed of everything that was discussed. While we told Asad we would have to get Rabin’s approval before committing to the arrangement he wanted for the negotiations, Asad confidently asserted that Rabin would agree.

We were getting ready to leave when Asad said, “You may think this a strange question, but does Israel have any claim on the territory?” Secretary Christopher said, “No, the Prime Minister spoke only of full withdrawal.”

Not wanting any possible misunderstanding, I asked, “When you refer to claims are you referring to claims anywhere? The Israelis do make claims in the West Bank.” Asad quickly responded, saying he was only asking about “claims on Syrian territory or on the Syrian front.”

I shook my head no, saying, “There are no claims that we are aware of.” I added “that we *are* aware of” to protect us in case Rabin did, in fact, have some claims he had not mentioned.

With that very much in mind, I drew special attention to our exchange on this point when I subsequently briefed Itamar back in Washington on the meeting. He lis-

\*During the Bush administration, we had worked hard to get Asad to allow the small Jewish community in Syria to leave; after much prodding, he permitted them to do so. With only Secretary Christopher and me sitting there, it was pretty clear the “you” in this conversation was directed at me.

tened and did not correct our responses to Asad. I was able to tell Christopher after this briefing that Itamar had raised no objections to what we had told Asad and that it was safe to assume now that there were, in fact, no Israeli claims. Unfortunately, as we were to find out later, there might not have been claims, but there were different definitions of what full withdrawal meant.

At this stage, however, none of that was clear. Asad in all of our private conversations and in his public posture spoke only of “full withdrawal” from the Golan Heights. Rabin promised “full withdrawal, provided Israel’s needs are met.”

For now, we did not know there was a dispute over the meaning of full withdrawal. That would come the following year, tying our diplomacy in knots for over two months.

Asad, as we were to find out in nine months, viewed all the territory that was in Syrian control on June 4, 1967, as Syrian. Rabin felt any territory beyond the putative international border—the one affixed as part of the British and French mandates in 1923—should be Israeli. The difference in territory between these two lines was not significant, but for Asad every inch of the territory that he considered Syrian was “sacred.” And for Rabin, the difference had meaning for Israeli control of water, specifically their need to preserve the Jordan and Hasbani Rivers on the Israeli side of the border.

For now, we thought we had a historic breakthrough between Israelis and Syrians. The Syrians would get the Golan Heights back if they could offer peace and security for the Israelis. I, for one, thought the negotiations with Asad would be excruciating, but that we would produce a deal in time. On our return, in mid-August, we expected to start the negotiations in Washington the first week of September.

Then “Oslo” intervened.

#### | THE SECRET OSLO CHANNEL PRODUCES |

Both Secretary Christopher and I left for vacation to California shortly after our return from the Middle East. I had briefed Itamar on the second meeting with Asad and he seemed quite upbeat after that report. As we left for California, both the Secretary and I had high hopes on the Syrian track, and a view that with the Palestinians nothing would turn around quickly.

Here again we were in for a surprise. On August 25, Rabin called Secretary Christopher and asked if Foreign Minister Johan Holst of Norway and Shimon Peres could visit him secretly in California to brief him on an agreement that had been reached in Oslo, one involving Israel and the PLO.\* He would also send Itamar to join

\*Holst had become foreign minister after earlier serving as the defense minister.

the meeting. Christopher told Rabin this was fine (he would arrange for a military base in California to host the meeting) and that I would join him. Was there anything else? he asked. “No,” Rabin replied, but “I would appreciate it, Mr. Secretary, if you could call me back with your reaction after you have seen Holst and Peres.”

Christopher had alerted me in advance of the call so I could listen in; after the call, Christopher phoned me and asked, “What do you make of that?” I told him the secret channel Rabin always dismissed had now produced something significant or he would not be asking you to see Holst and Peres secretly and urgently. But he was still reserving judgment. Is it because he is uneasy about the content? Or about our reaction to their having done this without our knowing? “I suspect a little of both.” The Secretary thought that made sense. The meeting would take place at Point Mugu, a naval base a half hour from Santa Barbara. He asked me to come meet him at his beach house in Carpinteria, ten miles south of Santa Barbara.

I was staying in Burbank with Debbie’s family. We were due to return to Washington the next morning, and I took Debbie and the kids to the airport and proceeded to Carpinteria. As Secretary Christopher and I rode to Point Mugu, I observed that we might be on the verge of having breakthroughs on both Syrian and Palestinian tracks. I wondered if that was another reason for Rabin’s unease—that he was worried about how much change his public would absorb?

Both of us felt great anticipation over the prospect of an agreement between Israel and the PLO. It was not just the history of terror, violence, hostility, and mutual rejection. An agreement would indicate mutual recognition and all that it entailed. For Israel, mutual recognition would mean an acceptance of the PLO agenda, including statehood. For the Palestinians, it meant unequivocal acceptance of Israel and its right to exist. That meant a complete redefinition of the PLO and an acknowledgment of Israel’s needs. In effect, it would transform an existential conflict into a political conflict. In the Middle East, nothing could be more revolutionary.

When we arrived at the base it became clear that Secretary Christopher and I were not the only ones wondering about this meeting. Holst and Peres wondered about how we were going to respond.

Holst began by telling us the secret channel in Oslo had now produced an agreement on a Declaration of Principles, a very important agreement, a historic agreement. To gain the full support of the international community and the other Arabs—which was critical for Arafat—he proposed that the signing take place in Washington. Massive amounts of assistance would also be necessary to get the Palestinian economy up and running so the Palestinians could feel the benefits of peace.

He turned to Shimon Peres, who explained there were two ways to confront a conflict: “With the power of power or with the power of wisdom.” His government, in his



view, had chosen the latter, and agreed with the PLO on a Declaration of Principles. The DOP created a process in which Israel would gradually get out of the business of running Palestinians' lives; there was a timetable and targets for creating a Palestinian Authority first in Gaza and Jericho; Israel would withdraw from most of Gaza, leaving its settlements there in the interim period; the Palestinian Authority would govern the Palestinians, ending the military government. A second or "interim" agreement would expand the Authority through the West Bank, through "redeployment" of Israeli forces to specified military areas. Permanent status negotiations would begin after two years and would need to be resolved by the end of the five-year interim period. Jerusalem, refugees, borders, security arrangements, and relations and cooperation with neighboring states would be negotiated in permanent status.

The two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, would learn to live together. The Declaration of Principles emphasized cooperation in economic and security spheres. The logic, Peres stressed, was to build a network of cooperation so that the harder issues would become resolvable in a very different climate. Israel's interest dictated finding a way to live with the Palestinians, ending occupation, and developing a mutual, not a unilateral, approach to security; helping the Palestinians prosper was good for peace and good for Israel.

This Israeli government had made a choice to try to settle the conflict with the Palestinians, and to recognize that peace with the Palestinians would offer the best guarantee of security. The DOP offered the pathway for doing so. While Israel could content itself with filling in that pathway, he and the Prime Minister had made the decision not to take a partial step now. If you face "a gorge, you must leap it in one move." That is why they would also move to recognize the PLO, even though recognition was not necessary.

Peres asserted that the DOP stood on its own; it was an agreement and did not require Israel to recognize the PLO or vice versa. But since you could not walk across a gorge, but must leap across it, he and the Prime Minister were prepared to take the leap.

The question was how to proceed now. "Our Norwegian friends have been very helpful." However, Peres continued, "They know that only the United States can sell this agreement to the world and mobilize the resources necessary to meet the economic needs of the Palestinians." Holst nodded in agreement.

In light of that, Peres suggested that we announce the agreement as one the United States had brokered with the two parties and hold a signing ceremony at the White House. What did the Secretary think?

Warren Christopher asked to have a few minutes alone with me to go over their document and give a more considered response. But he said outright that he did not feel that we could claim it as our own.

I could tell that both Peres and Holst were uneasy as we broke. They feared we might not support it because it was done without us. Would we resist it on those grounds?

Secretary Christopher had been right to say we could not declare that we had brokered this agreement, and when we were alone I told him I agreed with him. Inevitably, both sides—Israeli and Palestinian—would reveal how the agreement was produced.

Peres's aide, Yoel Singer, had given the document to me while Holst was speaking, and now Christopher asked me what I thought of it. I told Christopher it was indeed historic—a comprehensive statement of aims on the interim period and permanent status. The interim period was linked to the process as a whole with timetables and targets laid out for the creation of an interim self-governing authority in Gaza and Jericho, elections for a council, the expansion of the authority to the remainder of the West Bank, the beginning of permanent status negotiations, and much else. The issues for permanent status were identified and the eventual agreement on this would lead, in the words of the document, to the "implementation of Security Council resolutions 242 and 338." In sum, I said it was a document of mutual accommodation and designed to produce mutual reconciliation. We had to support it enthusiastically.

We needed, however, to recognize two things. First, the hard work would now have to be done, translating the principles into a new reality on the ground, and it was clear even from a cursory reading that there were a lot of holes in it—not to mention that all the hard decisions were deferred. Second, I did disagree with Peres's insistence that Israel could sign this document without recognizing the PLO. I told Christopher that made no sense. Without mutual recognition, who would be making the agreement? Who would implement it? Who would be held responsible if it was not implemented?

The Secretary agreed it was historic and deserved enthusiastic support, but thought I should press Peres on the mutual recognition issue. Then he asked, "Dennis, do you think we should host the signing ceremony at the White House?"

There was no choice. A historic threshold was being crossed. We needed to promote it, elevate it, and generate momentum behind it. Nothing could more effectively do that internationally than having the President host the signing agreement at the White House. But I wanted to press both parties in some areas of our needs before we gave that away. The Secretary wanted those around him to call him "Chris," and at this moment I said, "Chris, if you would permit me, I would like to push Peres on the recognition issue and make it clear that we, for our own reasons, need a clear renunciation of terror and violence from Arafat and a readiness on his part to act against those who might engage in it. Our own dialogue with the PLO has been suspended since 1990. We cannot resume a dialogue, much less have the PLO in Washington for a signing ceremony at the White House, without such commitments on his part."

The Secretary agreed, and we rejoined Peres and Holst, who relaxed visibly when

Secretary Christopher told them we would do all we could to support the agreement. In response to my comments, Peres asked me to dictate the language we would need the PLO to accept, and I did so.\*

Then Christopher invited Peres and Holst and those who had come with them to have some refreshments. Wine and cheese were served and the Secretary, a man of civility and grace, offered a toast to “your extraordinary effort, your dedication to peace, and to continued success in the hard work of diplomacy that lies ahead.”

Peres came over to me and asked, “Dennis, what do you think?” “Mr. Minister,” I replied, “Ben-Gurion would be proud.”

Shimon, whose anxiety had given way to relief, was now very touched. His eyes watered and he offered me a simple “thank you.”

#### | NOTHING IS EVER EASY |

We had all agreed in parting that we would wait a few days before announcing anything so the Secretary could begin calling other Arab leaders to gain their support for the agreement. But not surprisingly, news of the Peres trip to California leaked out the next day in Israel, and with it the story of a possible breakthrough with the PLO. Over the coming two weeks, I was on the phone day and night as the Israelis and Palestinians tried to work out the document on mutual recognition. Arafat was resisting being held responsible for those who were opposed to the agreement and the violent acts they might commit, and wanted certain assurances on Jerusalem. Because we were not prepared to resume our contact with the PLO until the mutual recognition agreement was completed, I could not deal directly with anyone from the PLO at this point. So I worked through Terje Larsen, with whom I would soon develop a lasting friendship.

After much give-and-take, the issues related to mutual recognition were embodied in a public exchange of letters between Arafat and Rabin on September 9, 1993. In his letter, Arafat committed the PLO to resolving all outstanding issues of permanent status through negotiations, renounced terror and other acts of violence, and assumed “responsibility over all PLO elements and personnel in order to assure their compliance, prevent violations and discipline violators.” Rabin’s reply confirmed to Arafat that, “in light of the PLO commitments included in your letter, the Government of Is-

\*Yoel Singer also showed me language they had already drafted on renunciation of violence. I suggested an insert on the Palestinian responsibility to prevent violence as well as to act against those who would carry out acts of terror or violence.

rael has decided to recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and commence negotiations with the PLO within the Middle East peace process.”

This exchange was made possible in no small part by our insisting we would not announce a signing ceremony until the letters were signed, and by Terje Larsen’s and Johan Holst’s pressure on Arafat to conclude lest he lose this historic opportunity. As would be the case in every subsequent agreement, the existence of a deadline was the only way to produce an outcome.

There was one other complicating factor: Who would sign the agreement? Peres believed it was too much for Rabin and the Israeli public to have an event with Arafat, and so proposed himself and Abu Mazen, the putative number two in the PLO.

Rabin agreed; Israelis were not ready to see Arafat celebrated at the White House. But so long as Arafat thought Abu Mazen would be feted at the White House and not him, he had little stake in finalizing the agreement—or so Terje was telling me.

While I understood this, I thought it wrong to go against Rabin. President Clinton, however, had different ideas. When we were finally in a position to announce the event at the White House, the President made clear that he felt Arafat would have much more of a stake in the DOP if he was at the signing. He then asked Martin and me what he should say if asked about Arafat attending, and we suggested that he simply say the two sides had made the decision on representation and they preferred, at this stage, to be represented at the senior level by Peres and Abu Mazen. Not surprisingly, the President did not look convinced.

When he met the press to announce the event and was asked whether Arafat would be welcome if he wanted to come, the President simply answered “yes.” Martin and I looked at each other and in unison said, “Arafat is coming.” We also knew that now Rabin too would feel he had no choice but to come.

The ceremony was set for September 13. We had problems up to the last moment. I was up the whole night prior to the event. First, the Palestinians objected to the absence of any reference to the PLO in the DOP. Then Rabin declared that he would not show if Arafat was in military dress. We employed Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi Ambassador, to persuade Arafat: no guns and no uniforms.

Suddenly both sides were threatening not to come: the Palestinians if the PLO was not mentioned in the text; Rabin if Arafat was in uniform. I did not take the threats seriously. Was Arafat, who was desperate for the international stature and recognition that would come with the event at the White House, ready to turn around and not see the President? And would Rabin, having made the hard decision to do a deal with the PLO, now say forget it? I doubted it, and while bringing the Secretary up to date on our problems in the morning, I told him we should insist each side come and tell them they would pay the price if they did not.

I used these very words with Hanan Ashrawi, who had come as part of Arafat's delegation and called while I was riding with Secretary Christopher to the White House. She was pleading for the inclusion of the words "the PLO" in the document. I told her we could not do that, only the Israelis could, and that the Chairman needed to come now to the White House or lose everything.

As we arrived outside the Oval Office, the President's secretary, Betty Currie, informed me that I had a call waiting for me. Across from her desk was a credenza with phones on each end. Martin was on the phone on one end, obviously exasperated with Eitan Haber (Rabin's senior aide) over Rabin's resistance on Arafat's dress. I picked up the phone and Hanan asked me to speak to Nabil Sha'ath—one of Arafat's closest aides. Soon both Martin and I were screaming into our respective phones.

I could not hear everything Martin was yelling, only that he was yelling. For my part, I yelled at Nabil that the Chairman was about to make the biggest mistake of his life. Before the world he would be seen as unable to conclude what had been negotiated. He would embarrass the President of the United States and he would never again be welcome in America. We would have nothing to do with the PLO. Finally, Nabil wearily asked was there anything we could do, and I said, Nabil, nothing is possible if you do not show up. Expectantly, he asked could something be done if they did? "Nabil," I said, "all I can tell you is that nothing is possible if you don't. And if you don't, the consequences will be disastrous for you."

After a short pause—probably to tell Arafat—he said with a note of resignation, "Okay, we are coming." In the meantime, Martin had persuaded Haber and Rabin would be coming—all this barely fifteen minutes prior to the start of the scheduled ceremony.

When Nabil arrived with Arafat, who wore his customary olive drab uniform, he went over to Peres and said it would be a disaster for them if the PLO was not in the text. After all this, Peres agreed to write in the PLO both in the first line of the document and in the signature block at the bottom. Because we had prepared the documents for signature and there was no time to retype them, the words "PLO team" and "For the PLO" were inserted in handwritten letters.

The only thing that remained was the ceremony and the "handshake." Prior to the ceremony former Presidents Carter and Bush were in the Oval Office; while Martin and I were screaming at the two sides, Jimmy Carter was urging President Clinton to bring Rabin and Arafat together and have them talk to each other. I believe that it was Carter's urging, together with the President's own instincts, that led him to nudge Rabin and Arafat to a public handshake.

Rabin's personal difficulty in shaking Arafat's hand was there for the world to see. Clinton's literal embrace of the two, seemingly moving Rabin to shake Arafat's hand,

became the symbol of the ceremony. It was certainly one of Clinton's proudest moments.

September 13, 1993, was a day of extraordinary hope. The handshake between Rabin and Arafat symbolized a new beginning. Rabin's speech spoke to the emotional trauma many Israelis felt in embracing Arafat and the PLO, given their history of terror against Israelis. He identified with the grief of those whose families had been the victims of terror. But for the sake of all Israelis, he concluded it was time to take a chance on peace, time to end a hundred years' struggle, and time to reach out to each other and say, "Enough of blood and tears." Little did we know how hard that would be.