

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

*Simulating a Diplomatic Negotiation
Between Israel and Syria*

J. Lewis Rasmussen
Robert B. Oakley



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The views expressed in this volume are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace.

United States Institute of Peace
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Summary

In early November 1991, the United States Institute of Peace organized and conducted a four-day simulation of a diplomatic dialogue between two neighboring countries that had never had direct, official, bilateral talks. The policy exercise was designed to simulate the direct negotiations between Syrians and Israelis that would in fact be taking place shortly thereafter as a part of the Middle East peace process.

This essay presents a detailed description of that exercise, which was designed not for research or training purposes but as an experimental policy exercise with direct implications for peace-making and conflict resolution in the Middle East, particularly the linking of theory with practice. The description of the simulation itself is presented within the context of a broader discussion of simulations and their potential utility both for diplomats and for the field of conflict resolution.

The intensive simulation exercise was followed by a wrap-up roundtable discussion of Israeli-Syrian relationships and prospects for the overall Middle East peace negotiations. The participants proved to be very knowledgeable about the issues and the policies of their putative governments as well as about political and public attitudes and probable reactions to various events. All participants played their roles realistically. Simulated Israeli and Syrian

delegations presented tough initial positions and faithfully adhered to their respective government's fundamental objectives in later sessions. This situation generated a dynamic that, during the initial phases, closely paralleled what reportedly occurred at roughly the same time (November 3-6) in Madrid at the actual opening plenary session as well as in subsequent sessions of the real Israeli-Syrian bilateral working group, which met in Washington between January and May 1992. Insights drawn from the simulation were provided informally to government officials responsible for the actual negotiations and were said to have been quite helpful.

Preface

The United States Institute of Peace has since its inception provided numerous grants to individuals and institutions studying various aspects of conflict and conflict resolution in the Middle East, and several of our fellows and grantees have done extensive research and writing on this subject. The Persian Gulf War and its aftermath altered the previously pessimistic conventional wisdom about the possibility of achieving a more peaceful and durable order in the Middle East. Helping the U.S. government respond to what were perceived as promising new opportunities became a major Institute priority in 1991. With the approval of Congress, in early spring 1991, the Institute established a Special Middle East Program in Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution to encompass several new activities and to relate them coherently to other ongoing projects already included in the Institute's permanent programs of grants, fellowships, and in-house research.

As one element in this special program, between April and June 1991, the Institute convened a study group of American experts to identify those diplomatic techniques that have worked or not worked in earlier rounds of Arab-Israeli diplomacy. Former U.S. ambassadors to Middle Eastern capitals, assistant secretaries of state, special envoys for Middle East negotiations, members of the National Security Council staff, a congressional committee aide,

plus several scholars and current officials from the Department of State constituted this study group. The group's objective was to be neither all-encompassing nor exhaustive, but rather to summarize important lessons gleaned from past negotiating experiences—lessons particularly relevant for the U.S. initiative to revive Arab-Israeli negotiations in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War and to organize a Middle East Peace Conference.

The Institute's report, *Making Peace Among Arabs and Israelis* (Stein and Lewis, 1991), presents those lessons, detailing why various approaches and mediation techniques have succeeded or failed. The report does not focus on the issues of substance or propose a blueprint for a negotiated outcome to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Rather it emphasizes the diplomatic process—the means most likely to bring Arabs and Israelis together to negotiate and reach agreements.

In consultation with key officials from the Department of State, the Institute decided to follow up this study by examining the confluence of conflict resolution theory and practical experiences of past Middle East negotiations in conjunction with the convening of the Madrid Peace Conference on November 3, 1991. Rather than tackle the entire gamut of countries and issues, we chose to study the newly launched bilateral dialogue between the Syrians and the Israelis. This element of the peace process was the least understood, by the two participants as well as the United States and the then USSR, and was therefore potentially the most uncertain and volatile. For this reason, we accorded it top priority.

The following essay on simulated Syrian-Israeli direct negotiations is a result of this study. As with the earlier Stein-Lewis report, this study focuses on the diplomatic process, placing it within the framework of conflict resolution theory and the evolving fields of gaming and simulation. The study applies theory to a particular situation and, in so doing, moves from the general to the particular, from the theoretical to the practical. (Readers who are less interested in the development of simulation and gaming as tools of conflict resolution and more interested in the simulated

discussion of substantive issues may wish to begin with chapter 2, “Simulating a Diplomatic Dialogue: Syrian-Israeli Direct Talks.”)

The overall conclusion of those participating (more than twenty-five experts on the Middle East and/or conflict resolution) as well as those briefed on the exercise afterwards (including representatives of interested governments) was that the simulation exercise, as conducted, highlighted important procedural and substantive aspects of the real-world Israeli-Syrian negotiating dynamic. This example demonstrates how such realistic policy simulation exercises can make a valuable contribution to the successful practice of third-party mediation in a diplomatic negotiation between two hostile governments.

Samuel W. Lewis, President
United States Institute of Peace

