

Letters to the Editor

*Dore Gold and Shimon Shapira on the Golan Heights;
James Lindsay on a concert of democracies; and others*

DEFENDING THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

To the Editor:

The achievement of true peace between Israel and Syria is a laudable goal and could be a cornerstone of regional security. Unfortunately, in making the case for an Israeli-Syrian accord, Richard Haass and Martin Indyk ("Beyond Iraq," January/February 2009) misrepresent the proposals made by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Syria during his term in office, from 1996 to 1999. They assert that Netanyahu offered a "full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights" to Syrian President Hafez al-Assad.

This is simply untrue. In fact, in 1996 Netanyahu sought clarifications from U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher that the hypothetical statements made orally by Yitzhak Rabin, the late prime minister of Israel, about withdrawal from the Golan—known among diplomats as "the Rabin deposit"—did not bind the State of Israel. Both of us were dispatched to Washington to secure that understanding, which we obtained after a series of meetings with the highest levels of the Clinton administration. Itamar Rabinovich, former Israeli ambassador to the United States, who also headed Rabin's contacts with the Syrians, confirms in his memoir, *The Brink of Peace*, that Christopher wrote in

a letter to Netanyahu that his government was not in any way bound by the contents of the diplomatic record from that earlier period.

Moreover, in 1998, when Netanyahu exchanged messages with Assad through Ronald Lauder, at no point did Netanyahu agree to withdraw from the Golan Heights, as Haass and Indyk suggest. At the end of this initiative, Assad did indeed request a map from Netanyahu specifically indicating the extent of a future Israeli pullback from the Golan Heights. Clearly, the language used during these contacts between Jerusalem and Damascus did not satisfy the Syrian leader, who sought to establish Syrian sovereignty right up to the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. Netanyahu refused to provide any map of withdrawal, let alone the line that Assad sought. At the end of these contacts, Assad inquired again just where Netanyahu envisioned the future Israeli-Syrian border in relation to the 1967 line. He wanted to know how far east the final line would be: "Dozens of meters, hundreds of meters, or what?" Netanyahu's answer, which was communicated to Damascus, was that the border would be "miles" east. (The entire Golan Heights is 12 miles wide.) In light of this response, Assad decided to end his negotiations with Israel.

Netanyahu had additional reasons for taking this position and not exposing Israel to the dangers inherent in a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Back in 1975, U.S. President Gerald Ford had written to Rabin that although the United States had not yet taken a stance on where Israel's ultimate borders should be, when it did so, it "would give great weight to Israel remaining on the Golan Heights." Repeatedly during the 1990s, U.S. administrations assured Israeli governments that the commitments made by Washington in the Ford letter would still be respected.

The Golan Heights remain a vital line of defense for Israel. The stability of Israel's northern border with Syria partly emanates from the fact that at present, the Israel Defense Forces are deployed on the Golan Heights and not in the valley below.

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Haass and Indyk reply:

As in any recounting of diplomatic history, the record of secret negotiations is colored by the perspective of the participants. In this case, Dore Gold and Shimon Shapira view the negotiations from the perspective of Benjamin Netanyahu, with whom they worked when he was prime minister of Israel. Martin Indyk views these negotiations from the perspective of U.S. President Bill Clinton, whom he served as assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs. His perspective is quite different.

As Indyk details in his recent book, *Innocent Abroad*, the negotiations that Netanyahu conducted in 1998 with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad were conducted behind the back of Clinton and his aides. They used Ronald Lauder, a former Republican U.S. ambassador to Austria and close friend of Netanyahu's, as a go-between. When Netanyahu was defeated in elections by Ehud Barak in 1999, he ordered Lauder to brief Barak on those negotiations; Barak then ordered Lauder to brief Clinton. Lauder provided Clinton with a paper that contained a summary of the ten points that Netanyahu and Assad had agreed on in their negotiations. Point one of Lauder's summary stated, "Israel will withdraw from the Syrian land taken in 1967 . . . to a line based on the line of June 4, 1967." In other words, Netanyahu had conveyed to Assad that Israel would make a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, as claimed in our article.

It strains credulity to believe that, and would represent incredibly bad faith in the negotiations if, Netanyahu had intended the line to be drawn "miles" east of the line of June 4, 1967, as Gold and Shapira contend. Given the narrowness of the Golan Heights, that would in reality have been a line based on the current line of disengagement. Netanyahu certainly knows that no Syrian leader would make peace on that basis. Either he was being insincere in the negotiations or his aides are engaging in revisionist history.

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

To the Editor:

Charles Kupchan's contribution to the debate over how best to promote international cooperation in a globalized world ("Minor League, Major Problems,"