

Men at Work

Clinton has to find the right push-pull to keep Israel and Syria talking peace

By DOUGLAS WALLER/SHEPHERDSTOWN

SO YOU'VE GOT TWO GUYS IN A ROOM WHO want to make peace. Now how do you get them to ice the deal? That's the trick for President Clinton, who is just as eager as are Israel and Syria for the two old enemies to reach a land-for-peace agreement that would add real luster to his presidential legacy.

Like Middle East peacemakers before him, Clinton has to find just the right mix of push and pull. While the outlines of the exchange—return of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights for secure, peaceful relations—are pretty well understood, the detailed terms are anything but. When Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Shara spent their first two days of talks last week fencing, Clinton tried invoking history. The secluded West Virginia site at Shepherdstown, he reminded them, was only a few miles from Antietam. There Americans fought one of the bloodiest battles in their Civil War that took hundreds of thousands of lives. “What we’re deciding in Shepherdstown,” he said, “will affect the lives of millions of people in the Middle East.”

Whether Barak or Shara was seized by the

thought, Clinton couldn't tell. But he shuttled the 70 miles to Shepherdstown four times last week in pursuit of a simple strategy: “Get the two sides to talk to each other as much as possible.”

The President had to stay nimble just to keep the talks going. When Shara demanded that borders be considered first and Barak insisted on beginning with security arrangements, Clinton proposed that committees on both subjects meet simultaneously. When Barak and Shara balked again, Clinton scrapped the committee idea and helicoptered back to discuss both issues with the two men himself. By the end of the week, he had presented them with a “working document” on the remaining differences, hoping that might force the pace.

Clinton remains optimistic that he can eventually coax them to agreement, but the key argument may come down to cold cash: How much for each side from the U.S. government? The 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt still costs the U.S. about \$5 billion in annual foreign aid. Just before Christmas, Amos Yaron, director general of the Israeli Defense Ministry, visited the Pentagon with a wish list of cruise missiles, attack helicopters, surveillance planes and missile defense hardware that Israel says it needs to feel safe in giving up the Heights. U.S. generals choked when their calculators spit out the cost: \$17 billion over 10 years. Then there's the billions Syria will demand for its sickly economy—a key motive behind Syrian President Hafez Assad's willingness to talk peace. “A deal this big is going to carry a price tag,” admits James Rubin of the State Department.

Even so, a Syrian treaty would be a cost-effective strategic victory for Washington. It would open the way for Persian Gulf states to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. In that part of the world, peace may come at a high price, but the one thing more expensive is war. ■

Questions

1. What are the general terms of the peace deal between Israel and Syria?
2. What was Bill Clinton's strategy during the talks at Shepherdstown?

