

## **Converging Interests: Essential, but not Enough**

**Aluf Benn**

On May 21, 2008, Israel and Syria announced that under the auspices of Turkey, they would begin indirect peace talks in an effort "to reach a comprehensive peace." Syria asserted that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had committed to a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights to the June 4, 1967 border, and Israel did not explicitly deny the report. The American administration, which was informed in advance, reacted to the announcement with little enthusiasm, but has not labored to torpedo the process.

The announcement of the renewal of Israel-Syria negotiations after an eight year hiatus came following separate talks by the Turks with Israeli and Syrian officials in Ankara. As in the past, reports of the revival of negotiations with Syria aroused much hullabaloo among the Israeli public and Israeli politicians. The prime minister was accused of using the talks to deflect public attention from the criminal investigations against him. Any substantive debate on the issue, however, will apparently be postponed until it becomes clearer what is actually under discussion.

The Israeli version relates that the Turkish mediation on the Syrian channel began after Olmert's visit to Ankara in February 2007, whereupon Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his aides began conveying messages between Jerusalem and Damascus. Israel suspended these contacts after several weeks, following what was then described as concern over possible escalation of violence in the north; tensions culminated in Israel's reported bombing of a Syrian nuclear facility in September 2007. Shortly after the Israel Air Force attack, Olmert and Erdogan agreed to renew the contacts.

The format agreed on for the talks represents a compromise position between Israeli and Syrian demands. Assad had demanded that the talks be conducted in public, with American mediation, and based on a prior Israeli commitment to withdraw in full from the Golan Heights. Olmert wanted secret and direct talks, and a Syrian commitment to disengage from Iran, Hizbollah, and Palestinian terror organizations. Looking for bridging formulas, Olmert made it clear that he is "aware of the proposals his predecessors conveyed to the Syrians," which were based on a full withdrawal.

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According to public opinion surveys published in *Yediot Ahronot*, most of the Israeli public opposes withdrawal from the Golan Heights and does not believe that Syria is intent on peace.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps ironically, the public debate in Israel has focused less on the issue at hand and more on whether a prime minister who is under investigation is worthy of conducting sensitive political negotiations – or the contrary, i.e., if the suspicions against Olmert generate his incentive to achieve an historic settlement with Syria.

### **The Strategic Interest**

The arguments in favor of a peace settlement with Syria are not new and have resonated consistently since the early days of the peace process in 1991. Supporters of an agreement say that the Asad presidents – Hafez and his son Bashar – have been a trustworthy and stable element that can “deliver the goods,” unlike the weak leaders of the Palestinian Authority. Peace with Syria will complete agreements with the countries that surround Israel, open up a land route for Israel to Turkey and Europe, reduce the risk of an all-out war, and weaken the Palestinians' bargaining power in discussions over a permanent agreement. The agreement with Syria is also perceived as less problematic than the Palestinian channel: essentially this is a matter of determining a border and security arrangements, following detailed negotiations that took place in previous years. The Syrian process has no sensitive and ideological problems such as Jerusalem or the Palestinian claim to a right of return.

Spearheading Israel's call for a revival of the Syrian channel were leaders of the defense establishment, including Defense Minister Ehud Barak, Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, and the head of Intelligence, Amos Yadlin. They deemed an agreement with Syria a means of improving Israel's overall strategic situation, against a backdrop of increasing tension with Iran and the ongoing confrontation with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

According to the annual assessment submitted by IDF Military Intelligence to the Cabinet, the principal security threat to Israel in 2008 derives from the establishment of a military alliance between Iran, Syria, Hizbollah, and Hamas, with outside support from the global jihad. This sort of “resistance coalition” could launch a coordinated assault on Israel, with terror attacks and missiles and rockets fired at the home front, in response to an Israeli attack on the nuclear plants in Iran, the reoccupation of Gaza, or an escalation in Lebanon. Moreover, there is no question that

in the wake of the failure of the Second Lebanon War, the stronger ties between the members of the "resistance alliance," and their ongoing military reinforcement, Israel senses strategic pressure. A country faced with a coalition of enemies aims to disconnect one from another, in order to improve its strategic situation. Renewal of the Syrian channel will give Israel an opportunity to remove a key link from the hostile chain, prior to the moment of decision against Iran.

Even if Israel has not yet decided to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, it clearly wants to reserve the freedom to decide on such a course of action. The more Israel manages to weaken the Iranian influence on its surroundings, the easier it will be for decision makers in Jerusalem to deal with the Iranian threat and the risk of all-out war if, for example, the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz is destroyed. If Syria stands to the side after such an action, the arsenal of missiles and rockets directed towards Israel would be significantly smaller. While Hizbollah can attack Israel with its tens of thousands of rockets, it would suffer the absence of the Syrian logistic and strategic rear that helped it during and after the Second Lebanon War. Hamas is geographically detached from the Syrian arena but its leaders are located in Damascus under Asad's protection and are quite wary of offending him. This was exemplified a few days after Asad announced his peace intentions, whereupon Hamas leader Khaled Mashal released moderate announcements of his own.

An agreement with Israel is designed to offer Syria a viable – and desirable – alternative to its alliance with Iran, in the form of closer relations with Washington and reduced regional tension. Syria has consistently signaled that it straddles the fence, and has not explicitly embraced Iran's radical ideology vis-à-vis Israel. Asad does not spout Ahmadinehad's radical rhetoric; on the contrary, he has emphasized his commitment to peace. One effective way, therefore, to examine Syria's willingness to distance itself from the radical coalition will be to confront Asad with the dilemma of "the Golan or Iran." If he helps Iran in a war against Israel he would risk losing the Golan for many years. Conversely, if he believes good conduct will encourage the Golan's return to Syrian hands, he would be tempted to leave the Iranians to themselves.

There are two main arguments against this approach. The first is that the alliance with Iran has been an important strategic interest for Syria for over a quarter of a century, and Syria will not forfeit it for Israel, and certainly not for promises of a withdrawal that were made in the past and not realized. The second argument reduces the severity of the threat of a coordinated attack by a pro-Iranian coalition. In the last

two years Israel has fought against Hizbollah, bombed Syria, and inflicted heavy damage on Hamas in Gaza. The allies provided financial and military aid to the specific party fighting Israel but were very wary of open involvement in the confrontation. This suggests that even if Israel attacks Iran, the Syrian reaction against it would not be automatic, while withdrawal from the Golan would be an irreversible step with far reaching implications.

### **What's the Rush?**

If matters are so simple, and Israel's strategic interest is so clear cut, why have all efforts to date to attain peace with Syria failed? And what can we learn from the failures of the past about the chances of success of the negotiations at the present time?

Since Yitzhak Rabin's assumption of power in 1992, the basic premise of Israel's leaders was that they do not possess sufficient political power to achieve agreements that will include withdrawals on both the Syrian and Palestinian fronts. A simultaneous withdrawal from the West Bank and from the Golan Heights was perceived as too steep a price for public opinion in Israel to swallow. Rabin and his successors Shimon Peres, Binyamin Netanyahu, and Ehud Barak initially examined the Syrian channel, but they did not achieve a breakthrough and opted to progress with the Palestinians. Ariel Sharon refused to conduct negotiations with any Arab leader and opposed reviving the Syrian channel on the grounds that the Palestinian issue was more pressing, and that Israel had an interest in isolating Syria. Ultimately, Sharon chose a unilateral withdrawal on the Palestinian front and maintained the status quo with the Syrians. Like Sharon, Olmert believed that the solution to the Palestinian issue was more pressing for Israel, and he addressed the Syrian channel belatedly and with a low profile, compared with his talks with Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas over the principles of a permanent settlement.

What made six successive Israeli leaders pursue the Palestinian route, which seems far more complicated and sensitive than the Syrian channel? Apparently, the political and military cost of the status quo on the Golan Heights was and remains negligible, compared with the cost Israel pays over its continued control of the Palestinians. Syria has desisted from using force to regain possession of the Golan Heights, while the Palestinians have worn Israel down with unceasing terror activity.

One may assume that the prime ministers had a thorough knowledge of the strategic arguments for a settlement with Syria, and seemingly also embraced them.

But the picture from the prime minister's office is different than from the chief of staff's office or Military Intelligence. Every Israeli prime minister crafts his policy around two pillars: preservation of internal political support, and the promise of American support. When there is tension between these two constraints, the danger of a political crisis and the collapse of the government increases. Such was the fate of Yitzhak Shamir, Peres, Netanyahu, and Barak, who lost their power and lost elections.<sup>2</sup> Sharon and Olmert managed to survive, mainly because they were able to balance appeasing the US and securing their political footholds. Olmert agreed to negotiations over a permanent settlement under pressure from US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, but refused to evacuate outposts and risk a domestic confrontation with the right, or remove roadblocks in the territories and thereby challenge the defense establishment.

In the conditions that have evolved in recent years, particularly since the outbreak of the second intifada, an effort to achieve a settlement with Syria runs counter to an Israeli prime minister's political interests. The United States and the international community have not pressed Israel to achieve peace with Syria, while in the domestic arena, it was clear that such a move would meet stiff public and political resistance.

### **Little Pressure from the Outside**

Israeli is under heavy international pressure to end or at least moderate its direct and indirect control of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Every Israeli leader or diplomat who meets a foreign dignitary will hear claims about the continued existence of settlements and roadblocks in the West Bank and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Even when Israel is considered justified in the conflict with the Palestinians, for instance after the Hamas takeover in Gaza, the international consensus still deems it a conquering power that denies the civilian and political rights of another nation, occupies its land, and uses exaggerated force against it.

Israel sees its control of the West Bank as an essential security need and is willing to pay the price of international pressure, even while trying to alleviate it. Sharon decided to withdraw from the Gaza Strip to the pre-1967 Green Line and to freeze construction of settlements outside the security fence on the West Bank. Olmert proposed withdrawing from most of the West Bank ("the convergence plan") and after shelving the idea, agreed to conduct talks with Abbas over an agreement of principles.

The disengagement from Gaza and the Annapolis process greatly improved Israel's international standing but did not end the pressure to improve the humanitarian situation in the territories and stop the settlement activity.

In the Syrian arena the situation is reversed. There Israel enjoys total international silence. Despite the legal consensus that the Golan is occupied territory, at least beyond the 1923 Syria-Palestine international border, "the world" is not pressuring Israel to withdraw and return the land to the Syrians. The Israeli communities on the Golan Heights are not bothering anyone in the United States or the European Union – at least as long as there is no massive expansion – and no one is concerned over the situation of the Druze in the northern villages on the Golan, who live under Israeli control.

The administration of President Bush Sr. and the first Clinton administration saw great strategic importance in achieving Israeli-Syrian peace. A political settlement that would win Syria over to the moderate, pro-American camp seemed like an important element in consolidating regional stability against Iraq and Iran, and was viewed as a natural successor to peace between Israel and Egypt (and later Jordan as well). Failure of these talks, and failure of the last attempt by Clinton to mediate between Barak and Hafez al-Asad in March 2000, led to shelving the Syrian portfolio and shifting American focus to the Palestinian channel. European and other governments that took an interest in the political process have from the start focused on the Palestinian issue and hardly intervened in the Syrian channel.

The administration of President Bush Jr. intensified this tendency and related to Syria as a problematic and ostracized country with a non-legitimate regime. The US accuses Syria of offering protection for terror used against its forces in Iraq, and supports the existence of an independent and democratic Lebanon. Following the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, Bush and former French president Jacques Chirac led the international effort to oust Syria from Lebanon and establish an international court to investigate the murder. Bush also rejected the findings of the Baker-Hamilton Commission, which proposed renewing Israeli-Syrian negotiations as a means of containing the strategic damage caused by the war in Iraq.

The Bush administration focused, albeit belatedly, on advancing a two-state solution to the Palestinian conflict. One may assume that Bush was wary of a renewed Syrian takeover of Lebanon, under cover of the agreement with Israel, and did not believe that returning the Golan Heights would bring stability and quiet to Iraq. More

conservative elements in the administration have also expressed quiet displeasure with the idea of a withdrawal from the Golan. Moreover, after the bombing of the suspected nuclear plant in September 2007, which was an act of war in by any reasonable interpretation of international law, Western governments withheld criticism of Israel. Bush even publicly praised the action several months later. No one in the world – including in Arab countries – called for using the bombing to renew the peace process and prevent further escalation in the north. Only Turkey, which has a direct interest in calming tension around it, showed interest in a revival of the Syrian channel.<sup>3</sup>

Israel is far from Iraq and does not influence what occurs there, but events in the Lebanese arena have great importance for Israel's interests. The 2005 "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon and the ousting of the Syrians appeared to be the only achievement of the Bush policy to promote democratization in the Arab world. Israel, on the other hand, would prefer Syria to control Lebanon and exert its authority over Hizbollah, and has considered the Siniora government in Beirut as a nuisance that does not contribute to security or stability. The discord came to a head in the Second Lebanon War when Israel wanted to destroy Lebanon's infrastructure and encountered US objection. Overall, therefore, Olmert can estimate that the political benefit that Israel can gain from progress with the Syrians will be negligible, if anything. Israel would even be liable to look like it was looking for a bypass route to avoid making concessions to the Palestinians. However, it does not appear that the US administration will try to intervene in negotiations, and there is also importance to boosting the US relations with a regional ally such as Turkey.

### **No Enthusiasm at Home Either**

Since the armistice with Syria was signed in May 1974, the Golan Heights are the envy of other areas in Israel for their calm and stability. Syria adheres to the ceasefire agreement zealously, and even its veiled threats to encourage "resistance" in the Golan have not been translated into action. To be sure, Syria has harmed Israel indirectly through Hizbollah and Palestinian organizations, but the public debate in Israel tends to ignore that.

The security calm, along with the breathtaking views and the absence of a hostile and rebellious population, has contributed to the great popularity of the Golan among Israelis. In political and media terms, inhabitants of the Golan are "residents" and not "settlers," as in the West Bank. There are also no movements and advocacy

organizations parallel to Peace Now and B'tselem, Gush Shalom, or the Geneva initiative that aim to dismantle the settlements and have Israel withdraw from the West Bank. The Movement for Israeli-Syrian Peace, established by former Foreign Ministry director general Alon Liel, has yet to make its mark on the public. Golan residents have organized noticeably and effectively with their rapid response to any suggestion of renewing the Syrian channel.

There is, therefore, no pressure on Olmert to make progress on the Syrian channel. However, he has a political interest to appear to be following this route. First, talks with Syria will make it difficult for the Labor party, led by Barak, to leave Olmert's coalition. The defense minister will struggle to explain why he broke up a government that was pursuing his political agenda. Second, Olmert wants the backing of the media and the public figures who support peace agreements, particularly in view of the investigations he is under.

The political difficulty will come with a transition from talks to an actual settlement. The vast majority of the public is currently opposed to withdrawal from the Golan. The public can of course change its mind, but the government will have to launch a massive marketing campaign in order to overturn public opinion, and an unpopular leader like Olmert will find that difficult to pull off. Legislation on the Golan of 1999 requires a majority of 61 MKs to rescind the annexation of the Golan to Israel, and in certain conditions a referendum too. One may assume that signing an agreement with Syria, which would require the evacuation of the Golan Heights population centers, will spark a sizeable wave of protest from the right to the political center. Attaining a solid parliamentary majority to support such an agreement will be at best complicated. Even the ruling party, Kadima, is divided over withdrawal from the Golan.

However, as long as there is no settlement, the Israeli political system is ready to accommodate talks with Syria. Thus far, no government has fallen or been unseated because of the Syrian channel. The National Religious Party and Shas stayed in Barak's coalition when he proposed withdrawing almost to the Sea of Galilee. Shas is critical of Syria as a member of the axis of evil, but did not threaten to resign from the government, as it did should the government agree to negotiate the future of Jerusalem. Overall, the seeming apathy by the religious right parties to the fate of the Golan stands in stark contrast to their behavior with regard to a permanent settlement with the Palestinians.

The conclusion is that Olmert can progress in talks with Syria, and as long as he doesn't advance too quickly and matches his moves to the political system's ability to accommodate the progress, he can keep his coalition intact.

### **What Has Changed Since 2000**

Efforts to renew talks prompt the question, what has changed in the Syrian channel since the cessation of talks in March 2000. The territorial dispute has not changed, nor have Syrian and Israeli basic interests. However, one can identify a number of changes that impact on the content of an agreement, as well as the motivation and ability of the sides to achieve it.

The principal change derives from the generational shift in the Syrian leadership. Hafez al-Asad aroused great curiosity and respect in Israel (Barak called him "the formulator of modern Syria"). Meanwhile, his son has been derided as a childish, irresponsible leader ("Playstation player," "detached from his surroundings," "Nasrallah's groupie"), but the scorn was premature. Bashar al-Asad has emerged as a bold leader who is ready to take risks in order to improve his country's strategic position. In 2001, not long after he rose to power, Bashar decided to provide Hizbollah with advanced Syrian weapons, and not just serve as a transit station for Iranian weaponry en route to Lebanon. Thus Hizbollah became Syria's indirect strategic arm against Israel.<sup>4</sup> According to CIA estimates, around the same time Bashar also decided to acquire a reactor from North Korea in order to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons. Had the project succeeded Syria would have achieved its desired strategic balance with Israel and positioned itself as the strongest Arab state. Bashar also dared to provoke the United States and indirectly encourage terror in Iraq, which cost him a forced retreat from Lebanon.

Yet thus far, Bashar is still wary of crossing the line and launching an overt attack on Israel in order to wrest the Golan by force. Even after the alleged nuclear facility was bombed he refrained from a military response and tried to minimize the importance of the event. Asad also overlooked the assassination of senior Hizbollah leader Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus in February 2008, and did not follow Hassan Nasrallah in accusing Israel or threatening a response. At the same time, until now Asad did not display daring or determination in a quest for peace. He upheld his father's demands that talks be based on a prior commitment to a full withdrawal, and did not end the stagnation with a dramatic move such as meeting with the Israeli prime

minister or going to Jerusalem. He even forbade his delegates from meeting with their Israeli counterparts.

The second change results from the upheavals in Lebanon. Previous talks took place while Israel controlled the security zone in Lebanon and waged an ongoing war with Hizbollah. The working premise on the Israeli side was that when the Golan is returned, a peace treaty will also be signed with Lebanon and Hizbollah, like the other militias, will be disarmed. In 2008 the situation is different: the IDF is out of Lebanon and Israel is not suffering casualties in the security zone. Hizbollah, however, is much stronger, and Syria has lost its direct control of Lebanon. It will be hard today to demand from the Syrians that they disarm Hizbollah as part of a peace settlement. This naturally detracts from Israeli motivation to achieve a settlement: if once Lebanon was viewed as a secondary front, today it looks like a major threat. And if Syria is not capable of guaranteeing quiet along the length of the northern border, why give it the Golan?

The third change relates to the nature of the settlement. The talks conducted by Barak with the Syrians were cut off because of a dispute over control of the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Asad rejected the Israeli proposal to maintain Israeli control of a narrow strip of a few dozen or a few hundred meters around the lake, and insisted on a full withdrawal to the shoreline. Barak refused. Since then, two ideas for solving the territorial dispute have been proposed. One, put together in informal talks between Lial and the Syrian-American Abe Suleiman, was to make the shore and foothills of the Golan into a park under Syrian sovereignty to which Israelis would have free access. A second idea was raised by Israeli politicians who suggested recognizing Syrian sovereignty over the Golan and leasing the area for a long period. The two ideas have yet to be examined in depth in formal talks but they raise the possibility of a creative solution to the border dispute.

The fourth change derives from the results of the Second Lebanon War and the disengagement from Gaza, and the revival of the Israeli internal debate over the importance of territory in an age of missiles and rockets. The sense in the Israeli public that any territory that is evacuated becomes a base for rocket launching is double-edged. On the one hand, the Second Lebanon War demonstrated that rockets are capable of hitting the rear from a great distance and perhaps reinforced the argument that territory is of no importance in the face of long range missiles. The fear of thousands of rockets and missiles launched at the home front strengthens the security

incentive to reach an agreement with Syria, even at the cost of the Golan Heights. In other words, those favoring an agreement see forfeit of the Golan as a reasonable price for protecting Tel Aviv and Haifa from Syrian Scuds. However, the war also indicated that ground level control of territory is the most effective way of thwarting rocket launches, and bolstered the position of those opposed to making territorial concessions on the Golan.

### **All or Nothing?**

Presumably Olmert and Asad are well aware of the considerations that complicate the chances for an agreement between Israel and Syria. Why, then, have they taken the risk and decided to revive negotiations?

The answer is built into the understanding that Israel-Syria relations are not limited to the binary mold of "friend or foe." There is much value to the process itself and not only to the results of reducing tension, preventing escalation, and indicating a convergence of interests between the two sides. In game theory, the exchange of messages such as these between actors who cannot communicate directly with one another is called signaling, for example among large corporations that are legally barred from interaction to forestall monopolies.

In the present circumstances, Syria and Israel share an interest in containing the dispute between them and enjoying freedom of movement in various sectors without the other side intervening. Syria would like to capitalize on Bush's last – and power-waning – presidential days to reassert its presence in Lebanon via Hizbollah. No wonder that the resumption of negotiations was announced at the same time as the Doha agreement, which strengthened Hizbollah's control in Lebanon and weakened the anti-Syria camp in Beirut. Damascus would prefer that Israel sit on the sidelines and not interfere. Similarly, Israel needs freedom of movement in the Gaza Strip and possibly vis-à-vis Iran, and it would prefer that Syria not fight alongside Hamas and Iran, as well as rein in Hizbollah as much as possible.

Renewal of peace negotiations, therefore, acts as an alternative to an open process of strategic coordination between Jerusalem and Damascus. It should be seen as a mutual signal to close the September 2007 attack file, and as an understanding on dividing areas of influence in the coming months. Of course given the limited and indirect nature of the dialogue, the sides risk misunderstandings and violations of previous unofficial agreements. Yet Syria and Israel have a long history of mutual

signals and established red lines, and at this stage of their relations, not much more is to be expected.

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- <sup>1</sup> *Yediot Ahronot*, May 23, 2008. According to the survey, 19 percent of the public support a full withdrawal from the Golan; 29 percent a partial withdrawal; and 52 percent oppose any withdrawal. Respondents were divided as to the possibility of achieving peace with Syria in the foreseeable future. In a survey of April 25, 2008, after the disclosure of the contacts, 32 percent of the public at large and 25 percent on the Jewish public would agree to a full withdrawal from the Golan Heights; 74 percent of the public at large and 80 percent of the Jewish respondents did not believe that Asad's peace intent was genuine.
  - <sup>2</sup> Shamir ran into confrontation with President George Bush Sr. over the "settlements or guarantees" affair, and he lost his coalition partners on the right after the Madrid Conference. Peres ignored the public outcry and tried to rely on Clinton's support after the terror attacks in early 1996. Netanyahu's coalition disintegrated after the Wye agreement, and Barak lost his political partners on his way to Camp David.
  - <sup>3</sup> Erdogan is certainly looking to bolster his country's standing as an important element in the Middle East, and to strengthen the Justice and Development Party, which he leads, against the Kamelists in Turkey.
  - <sup>4</sup> The serious damage inflicted on Israel in the Second Lebanon War was caused mostly by weapons manufactured by Syria or supplied by Syria to Hizbollah, including the medium range rockets that landed in Haifa and anti-tank missiles that hit IDF tanks and soldiers in Lebanon.