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IS THERE A SYRIAN OPTION?

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Almost a year after it was declared dead, the Syrian track of the Middle East peace process may soon be declared born again. The inauguration of President George W. Bush and the prospect that Ariel Sharon will be elected Prime Minister raise the possibility that the United States and Israel – if Sharon is indeed elected – will give higher priority to negotiations with Syria than to the Palestinian track.

The Syrian track has several clear advantages and these have induced every incoming Israeli Prime Minister since Yitzhak Rabin to prefer a “Syria First” approach. For one thing, this track is much less complicated and emotionally charged than the Palestinian one. From the very beginning, it has focused on a defined territorial space – the Golan Heights – and during on-again, off-again negotiations stretching over the last decade, the gap between the parties has essentially been reduced to a narrow strip of land on the north-east shore of Lake Tiberias. For another, the benefits of peace with Syria are much more tangible and significant: an end to Hizbullah attacks against targets along Israel’s northern border, elimination of the Syrian military threat to Israel, disrupting the evolving reconciliation between Syria and Iraq, and distancing or mitigating the Iranian threat. These benefits would accrue, not only to Israel, but also

to the Bush Administration, whose major objectives in the Middle East are to promote regional stability, contain Iraq and Iran, and avoid over-involvement in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

These potential benefits are enough to tempt both the Bush Administration and any new Israeli government. That is certainly true of a government headed by Sharon, who will be eager to ward off international and domestic pressure to reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians. But it also applies to Ehud Barak if, in case of his re-election, it transpires that all efforts to reach agreement with the Palestinians are for naught.

Still, it is not clear that an American-Israeli initiative will produce a partner in Damascus. On the face of it, the Syrians have valid reasons to be responsive. Over the past few months, President Bashar al-Asad has pushed a far-reaching program of reform intended to rescue the Syrian economy from severe crisis and move it onto the path of modernization. This reform, unprecedented by Syrian standards, has been accompanied by signs of growing political openness; the tolerance shown to domestic rivals and critics is also unprecedented. Both the regime and the public are preoccupied with internal social and economic affairs, and a peace

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agreement with Israel would clearly improve the regime's ability to promote economic growth and to consolidate its power.

But what appears obvious to an observer in Israel is not necessarily obvious to a decisionmaker in Damascus. True, the Syrians responded enthusiastically to Bush's election and made no effort to conceal their relief at the defeat of Al Gore and his Jewish running mate, Joseph Lieberman. But that, alone, does not assure Syrian willingness, much less eagerness, to revive the negotiations with Israel.

Bashar's immediate priority is to entrench his rule. Notwithstanding the indirect benefits of peace for his regime, an agreement with Israel would not necessarily be a political asset. In fact, the Syrian public, like the public in most other Arab states, now takes a skeptical, even critical view of the peace process, in general, and of peace agreements, in particular, and it does not see an agreement as reason to support a political leader – perhaps the contrary.

Secondly, Bashar himself may well see peace in a different light. When he came to power, many observers expressed the belief, or perhaps the hope, that his western education and residence in Britain had shaped him into a reformer bent on dragging Syria into the 21st Century. But with the passage of time, Bashar increasingly resembles a refined and updated but nevertheless true facsimile of the original, his father Hafez al-Asad. And the hopes of many in the west that he would moderate Syria's approach to Israel have been exposed as groundless, at least for the time being.

Moreover, unlike his father, who waged war and suffered more than one defeat at Israel's hands, Bashar has no such experience. Instead, his knowledge of war is drawn from Hizbullah's successful struggle against Israel in south Lebanon or from the *intifada*. That is apparently the background for his declarations at the Arab

Summit Conference in October to the effect that Arabs must aspire to a "Peace of the Strong," that is, peace from a position of strength, rather than to a "Peace of the Brave" that implicitly requires painful concessions. This explains the concern of many in Israel that Bashar, unlike his father, will find it difficult to exercise restraint or control in the event of a clash between Israel and Hizbullah and that his reactions may drag Syria and the rest of the region into a general confrontation.

Thirdly, even if Israel were willing to offer Bashar what it refused to offer his father – the Tiberias shoreline – it is not at all clear that he would take up the challenge and resume the negotiations as long as the *intifada* continues unabated. Syria's renewed commitment to the Palestinian cause and the troubling scenes broadcast on Syrian Television complicate any decision to restart negotiations, much less to agree on peace, especially when Iraq, the leader of the rejectionist camp in the Arab world, is on the ascendant. Indeed, it is almost unimaginable that Syria would send an ambassador to Tel Aviv at a time when the Egyptian ambassador, recalled for "consultations," has not yet returned and when Cairo has called on Arab states to minimize their ties with Israel. In such circumstances, Syrians inclined to move forward can only hope that the Palestinians will reach some agreement or understanding with Israel that could provide the ladder needed to climb down from the limb of Syrian commitment to the Palestinian cause.

In short, the renewal of Israeli-Syrian negotiations is far from certain in the near term, especially while the *intifada* continues. Furthermore, given reports of a higher state of alert in the Syrian army, the most urgent priority is not to restart the political process but rather to manage the standoff through other means in order to prevent the outbreak of a new Syrian-Israeli confrontation.