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WHAT'S BEHIND BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S PEACE OFFENSIVE?

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There are growing indications that Syria wants to resume peace negotiations with Israel. In interviews in the western media, President Bashar al-Assad has even declared his willingness to establish full, normal relations with Israel. These declarations undoubtedly stem from the distress Syria feels as a result of growing American pressure, particularly since the U.S. conquest of Iraq. But Bashar's stated willingness to reach an agreement with Israel is also firmly grounded in the legacy of his father, Hafez al-Assad. And there is nothing to indicate that Bashar has deviated from his father's conditions for peace or that Syria is prepared to settle for less than complete Israeli withdrawal to the lines of 4 June 1967, i.e., for less than Syria's return to the shore of Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). Nor is it clear that Syria will ultimately agree to sign a peace treaty with Israel that stands "on its own two feet," that is, without regard to what happens on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

The negotiations that Syria now wants to resume broke off in early-2000 following the failure of the March summit meeting between Hafez al-Assad and U.S. President Bill Clinton. Later that year, after the outbreak of the Palestinian *intifada* in October, Hizbullah renewed its attacks on Israel, and relations between Israel and Syria

deteriorated even further. In October 2003, the Israeli Air Force even attacked a Palestinian training camp on Syrian soil. That air strike, the first of its kind since the Yom Kippur War, came in response to a terrorist attack by Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Haifa and was meant to signal Damascus to stop its support for Palestinian terrorist organizations operating there. These circumstances gave rise to concern about the possibility of a military confrontation between the two states.

Against this background, Syria's recent expressions of peaceful intent take on added significance, particularly in light of Bashar's willingness to go beyond his father's conditional commitments, e.g., on the matter of relations with Israel. This change undoubtedly stems from a sense of pressure and deep distress -- the result of the new regional realities in the aftermath of the war in Iraq and America's determination to push Syria hard on issues of concern to Washington, particularly the war on terror and weapons of mass destruction. Bashar apparently understands that the best way to ensure his regime's long-term survival and extract Syria from its economic travails is to reconcile with the United States. And for Syria, the road to Washington passes through Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, since he took office following his

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father's death in June 2000, Bashar has repeatedly shown that he is committed to his father's legacy, not only with respect to the idea of a peace agreement with Israel, but also with respect to the price tag. He does not face any apparent domestic resistance in pushing this project forward, even from the "Old Guard" that still surrounds him but is more concerned about the prospect of economic and social reform. After all, it was his father who paved the way, and Bashar's foreign and defense policies represent continuity in this respect. But "continuity" also means no real change in underlying attitudes toward Israel. Like his father, Bashar and those around him (as well as many others in the region) see Israel as an illegitimate and aggressive entity bent on expansion and constituting, by its very existence, a threat to the Arab world. Moreover, their anti-Zionist and anti-Israel pronouncements are often tinged with anti-Semitism, given public expression in recent years by senior Syrian officials, including Bashar himself. Nevertheless, Bashar, like his father, also seems to acknowledge the need to bring the conflict with Israel to an end.

While the protracted and tortuous negotiations in the 1990s ultimately yielded no agreement, they did allow Syria and Israel to reach a number of far-reaching understandings. First of all, the Syrians expressed their willingness to establish normal relations with Israel as part of an eventual peace. Secondly, the two states did come to an understanding about the security arrangements that would be put in place along the border between them, including demilitarized zones and an American early-warning station on the Golan Heights. Thirdly, they agreed that a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement would lead to complete quiet along the Israeli border with Lebanon.

The unresolved issue remained Syria's demand for Israeli withdrawal to the line of 4 June 1967. That would entail a Syrian right, as a riparian

state, to make use of Kinneret waters. At this point, there are no signs of any change in the Syrian position. On the contrary, Syrian spokesmen, including Bashar, continue to insist that negotiations resume at the point at which they broke off, meaning Israeli willingness to retreat to the line of 4 June, and they stress their categorical refusal to compromise in any way on their territorial demands.

Apart from the territorial issue, other obstacles remain on the road to peace. Syria's overall approach to Israel is still viscerally negative. Hostile declarations, often verging on anti-Semitism, have further alienated Israeli public opinion, which is liable to constrain the Israeli Government's room for maneuver. Moreover, Syria is unlikely to rein in terrorist organizations or halt its quest for weapons of mass destruction in advance of a peace agreement. Thirdly, it is still unclear whether Syria is prepared to reach a separate agreement with Israel regardless of developments on the Palestinian track. It was for precisely such an act that Anwar Sadat was vilified by the Syrians and denounced as a traitor to the Arab cause, and it is difficult to imagine that the Syrians would now follow in Sadat's footsteps. Finally, Syrian initiatives are directed at Washington no less than at Jerusalem. But Bashar's standing in Washington is at an all-time low, and the American Administration will not rush to get actively involved in any process that will also give a boost to Bashar's stature inside Syria. And without American activism, the parties by themselves will be hard put to produce a breakthrough in negotiations.

Bashar may indeed be serious in his desire to examine the prospects of a peace agreement. And even if his immediate motives are tactical, his actions have strategic significance. Nevertheless, the road to peace remains long and arduous.