

It's a Long Road to Peace with Syria

From the Second Lebanon War to Peace Overtures in Ankara

Eyal Zisser

Introduction

Since the end of the Second Lebanon War between Israel and the Hizbollah organization, Israel-Syria relations have fluctuated between concern over the outbreak of a confrontation and hope for renewing the peace process between the two countries, with possibly achieving a breakthrough.

The choice of the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006 as a significant milestone in Israel-Syria relations is not random. Many believe that the war served as the beginning of a new era in the relations between the two countries. After the war, which Damascus saw as a Hizbollah victory and a failure by Israel, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad felt confident enough to threaten Israel that if it did not withdraw from the Golan Heights, he would consider military action, or at the very least adopt the option of resistance (*muqawama*) based on the model successfully implemented by Hizbollah on Israel's northern border with Lebanon.

These threats, which were accompanied by unprecedented Syrian military deployment in advance of a possible confrontation with Israel – as well as IDF deployment against the Syrian army – generated an atmosphere of tension and sense of impending war. Moreover, they were enough to upset the equation that had existed between the two countries until then, and enable Bashar to try to create new rules of

Prof. Eyal Zisser, head of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies and a lecturer in Middle East history at Tel Aviv University

the game from a position of strength. These revised rules threatened to curtail significantly the freedom of movement that Israel had hitherto enjoyed vis-à-vis Syria.¹

Against a backdrop of tension if not expectation of an Israeli-Syrian confrontation, Israeli Air Force (IAF) jets attacked northern Syria on September 6, 2007. This attack, which targeted a Syrian nuclear facility built with the help of North Korea, helped to restore the balance to Israel-Syria relations, rehabilitated Israel's deterrence against Damascus, and most of all, exposed Bashar's war threats since the end of the Second Lebanon War as empty rhetoric.² Syria refrained from reacting and even from blaming Israel following the assassinations of Hizbollah military commander Imad Mughniyah on February 12, 2008 in the heart of Damascus, and Muhammad Suleiman, Bashar al-Asad's close military advisor, in the Syrian coastal town of Tartus on August 1, 2008. In addition, less than three months after the Israeli air strike, Syria decided to participate in the Arab-Israeli peace summit at Annapolis, albeit at low political levels, and in April 2008, two months after the attack on Mughniyah, it announced renewal of contacts with Israel, albeit as indirect talks with Turkish mediation. Damascus thereby signaled its preference for a political option.

The intelligence and security community in Israel pressured Olmert to try to advance the political process with Syria, based on the belief that this could help sever the ties between Tehran and Damascus, and in any case harm Hizbollah.

Yet despite the renewal of indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria, there are no signs of a breakthrough that will lead to a peace agreement between the two countries and direct them away from the path of confrontation they have pursued for generations. The difficulty in achieving such a breakthrough stems first and foremost from a lack of a genuine vision of peace, along with determination, persistence, and most of all personal and political strength among Syrian and Israeli leaders, as well as in the US administration. Indeed, while the Syrian president has made many lofty statements about his wish for peace with Israel, it is questionable whether Bashar al-

Asad has the will and the determination to execute a significant political process with Israel, with all that entails, as did Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat.

In other circumstances one could have expected Israel and the United States, the other partners in the political process, to compensate for Bashar's shortcomings or inabilities. Even if Bashar turns out to lack the drive to spearhead a peace process with Israel, he has said he would be ready to participate in such a process and, should the appropriate circumstances arise – namely, the fulfillment of his demands, even sign a peace agreement. Moreover, in recent years Bashar has more than once called on the Israeli government to begin peace talks with him, even though he stipulated particularly rigid conditions for the renewal of such talks. However, for a long time the Israeli government under Ehud Olmert, for internal political reasons, recoiled from furthering a peace process between Israel and Syria. Once Olmert did decide to take this mission upon himself, it seems the decision came too late. As for the Bush administration, it did not conceal its reservations and even its objections on conceptual and ideological grounds to any negotiations between Israel and Syria that could strengthen Bashar, without the receipt of anything in return from the Syrian leader, whether in Lebanon, the region, or the international arena.

Thus in light of the difficulty of advancing a real political process between Israel and Syria, the two continue to invest their efforts in preserving the fragile calm that seemed especially tenuous in the wake of the Second Lebanon War and was re-established following the Israeli attack in Syria on September 6, 2007, though one may assume it will be tested again in the foreseeable future.

Following the War: Calls for Peace and Preparations for War

On August 15, 2006, one day after the war ended, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad hurried to claim for himself and for Syria what he alleged as a victory against Israel. In a speech in Damascus to the Syrian journalists' convention, Bashar held a gun to Israel's head and presented it with a choice: renew the peace process with Syria and sign a peace agreement with Damascus that includes an Israeli withdrawal from the entire Golan Heights to the shores of the Sea of Galilee or, alternatively, run the risk of a new confrontation on the Golan Heights, similar to the confrontation between Israel and Hizbollah. According to Bashar, Syria will not sit by idly and wait indefinitely for the return of the Golan Heights to its possession. Instead it might adopt the military

option, or more precisely, the option of resistance (*muqawama*), in other words, a strategy of terror and guerilla warfare against Israel that eventually forced it to withdraw from southern Lebanon in May 2000 without anything in exchange.³

Bashar al-Asad's speech ushered in a new era in relations between Israel and Syria, characterized by the increasing fear of a confrontation between the two countries in view of the belligerent threats from Damascus, as well as in view of unprecedented large scale and intense military preparations on both sides of the border. Meanwhile, as if in contrast, activity intensified both in Jerusalem and Damascus regarding the possibility of renewed talks between Syria and Israel. Syrian spokespersons and particularly President Asad declared repeatedly that Syria was interested in renewing negotiations with Israel and was even willing to sign a peace agreement with it, if it met Syrian conditions. In Israel, experts and commentators called for considering a renewal of Israeli-Syrian negotiations in view of what appeared to many to be a worsening of Israel's strategic situation following the war in Lebanon.⁴

Will War Break Out in the Summer?

Following the Second Lebanon War, it seemed that the room for maneuver between Israel and Syria was shrinking. Between 2000 when Bashar assumed the presidency and 2007, Israel attacked Syrian targets on several occasions. In April and July 2001, the air force attacked Syrian positions in Lebanon in response to Hizbollah attacks on IDF outposts. Twice, in October 2002 and June 2006, IAF jets flew over Bashar al-Asad's palace in his hometown of Qardaha in northern Syria. The first time was in response to Hizbollah activity along the Israeli-Syrian border, and the second time was in response to the kidnapping of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit by Hamas. In October 2003, Israeli jets attacked an abandoned Palestinian training camp at Ein Sahab near Damascus, in response to the suicide bombing at the Maxim restaurant in Haifa, which was carried out by a female member of the Islamic Jihad, a Palestinian terror organization whose headquarters are located in Damascus. While on each of those occasions there was no response from Syria,⁵ Israel carried out these operations with the knowledge or at least the working

premise that both sides had enough room to maneuver to enable them to weather such events without their leading to escalation.

For its part, Syria undertook activities hostile to Israel, among them providing Hizbollah with advanced arms, including during the Second Lebanon War, and hosting the Hamas and Islamic Jihad headquarters in Damascus. Thus Bashar too apparently took for granted that there was room for both sides to maneuver against the interests of the other without concern that this could lead to full scale confrontation. However, in the wake of Second Lebanon War, this field of maneuver appeared to have vanished, so that the sides were no longer willing or able – in terms of the heightened rhetoric and tension, as well as the increased military deployment – to accommodate the other's mistakes, not to mention the other side's provocations. As such, any incident on either side of the border, including the most limited, could lead to large scale escalation, even if this outcome was unintended.

This new reality largely favored Syria, and it seemed that Bashar even managed to create new rules of the game based on the new balance of power generated by the Second Lebanon War. In other words, a balance of power that reflected decisive Israeli supremacy and afforded it generous freedom of movement yielded to a balance of power that conveyed Israeli caution and even fear of a confrontation that could end in failure, as did the confrontation with Hizbollah. This balance of power essentially reduced Israel's room for maneuver.

September 6, 2007: Bashar's Moment of Truth

Against this complex reality that formed the backdrop of Israeli-Syrian relations in the year following the Second Lebanon War, the Israeli Air Force carried out an air strike in the northeastern region of Syria in the early morning hours of September 6, 2007. For a long time Jerusalem refrained from officially referring to the operation. Apparently Israel's leaders sought to avoid humiliating Bashar al-Asad or pushing him against the wall, which would have forced him to react to the Israeli operation in a manner that was liable to lead to all-out war.

For its own reasons, Syria decided to publicize the attack. It seems that Bashar preferred not to wait for an Israeli announcement that – based on previous experience – was liable to embarrass if not humiliate the regime. Nevertheless, the Syrian statements about the attack were

at best confused and partial. The announcement made by the Syrian military spokesman, released in Damascus at midday on September 6, 2007, claimed that while the Israeli jets had entered Syrian air space, they were quickly forced to retreat by Syrian air defense units and therefore forced to dump their ordnance in an uninhabited region without causing any fatalities or damage to property.⁶ Several days later Syrian president Asad admitted that Israeli jets had indeed attacked a target inside Syria, but claimed that the target was of no military importance.⁷

In April 2008 the US administration decided to expose what occurred in northern Syria the previous September. On April 24, 2008, the White House spokesperson announced that the United States had proof that Syria had worked to develop nuclear weapons, and in the following days, on April 26 and 27, CIA officials presented to the House of Representatives and at a press briefing the story of the nuclear facility that Syria sought to establish in the north of the country with the aid of North Korea, which was destroyed by Israeli fighter planes on September 6, 2007.⁸

Either way, when the Israeli attack became common knowledge, all attention was directed to Damascus and Bashar al-Asad's expected reaction. Would he respond militarily, as intimated by his threats several times during the year, or would he prefer to ignore the provocation, as for years he was wont to do, certainly before the 2006 war. As time went by, it became clear that Syria was not looking for an escalation, and certainly not for all-out war. A clear indication of this emerged in an interview given by Bashar to BBC TV when he said: "When we talk about responding or retaliating this does not necessarily mean launching missile for missile, or dropping a bomb for a bomb. We have our own means of responding, for example a political response and perhaps also by reacting through other means and ways. Clearly we have the right to respond, but if we respond militarily, we would be following the Israeli agenda, which is something we have no interest in doing." Later in the interview, however, Bashar added that "a response is an option we always have."⁹

Moreover, on November 27, 2007, a few months after the Israeli air strike deep inside Syrian territory, an Arab-Israeli peace conference was held in Annapolis, Maryland. Syria was invited to this conference,

and after characteristically prolonged deliberations, Damascus decided to accept the invitation and send Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad as Syria's representative to the conference. Syria's hesitation stemmed from the fact that the conference was convened primarily to help advance Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, with the Syrian issue constituting only an insignificant footnote.¹⁰

Bashar's decision not to react to the September 6 attack bought him some largely justified credit for the restraint he displayed as a sign of political maturity. Nevertheless, the fact that Bashar was willing to collaborate with North Korea in the nuclear field in the first place indicates defective reasoning and the lack of good judgment that have characterized his actions repeatedly during his presidency. Bashar was ready to drag his country into a nuclear escapade that could have brought him to the brink of a confrontation with Israel, the United States, and the greater international community. This decision smacks of the hastiness and lack of prudence typical of Bashar's behavior that time and again brought him to a crisis point in his relations with Arab states and with the international community, led by the United States. Examples of his shortsightedness include his support for Hizbollah in its provocations against Israel since October 2000 and later, his decision to provide the organization with advanced Syrian-made missiles; opposition to the US during the war in Iraq in March-April 2003; the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005; the willingness to risk – potentially to the point of complete estrangement – Syria's relations with Western Europe, particularly with France, and with moderate Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

At the same time, Syria refrained from reacting to the assassination of Hizbollah military commander Imad Mughniyah on Tuesday night, February 12, 2008, at Kafar Sussa in the heart of Damascus. While spokespersons for Hizbollah, principally secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, quickly assigned responsibility to Israel for Mughniyah's killing, Syria kept a low profile. Apparently Syria was not interested in drawing the world's attention to its ties with Hizbollah and, even more so, to

Despite the renewal of indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria, there was no recognizable change in Syrian's posture on any of the issues in question.

its relations with Imad Mugniyah, a terrorist wanted by 42 countries around the world, led by the United States. Israel formally denied any connection to Mugniyah's killing. But, whether or not Israel was behind Mugniyah's assassination, the killing enhanced Israel's image and deterrent ability in the eyes of its enemies.¹¹

Ehud Olmert and the Syrian Option

In early 2008, therefore, there was a sense in Israel that the balance of Israel's relations with Hizbollah and Syria was restored, and that the balance of power along Israel's northern border was no longer in the adversaries' favor. It seems that at this point Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert concluded that he must act to renew the peace talks with Syria, and even try to reach a political settlement with it.

Olmert's motives also presumably stemmed from a series of political developments in Israel. Olmert survived the final Winograd Commission report on the Second Lebanon War, which refrained from calling on him to step down as prime minister. He managed to restore and even strengthen his position within the Israeli political system, both within his own Kadima party and among the coalition parties supporting his government, principally the Labor party, his main partner in the government. Ironically, the fact that Olmert was the least popular prime minister in the history of the State of Israel, a fact he himself acknowledged on various occasions, helped him promote far-reaching political moves. He felt free of the threat of public opinion and in particular, the threat of public opinion surveys that traditionally scare previous Israeli prime ministers and even paralyze them.¹²

It seems that the sense of political complacency, both domestically and externally, is what motivated Olmert to try to promote negotiations with Syria, which he believed could restore and even ensure his political future and possibly win him a venerable place in the history of the state. In addition, the intelligence and security community in Israel pressured Olmert to try to advance the political process with Syria, based on the belief that this could contribute to severing the ties between Tehran and Damascus, and in any case harm Hizbollah. Only that way, they argued, could Israel focus its efforts on the Iranian nuclear threat, the most serious threat it faced.¹³ Either way, in April 2008, Olmert sent a message to the Syrian president via Turkish prime minister Recep

Tayyip Erdogan, in which he said he was ready to commit himself to the pledge made by Yitzhak Rabin in August 1993 – Israeli willingness, albeit conditional, to carry out a full withdrawal to the lines of June 4, 1967 – thereafter known as the “Rabin deposit.” Transmission of the message and its contents were revealed by Syrian president Bashar al-Asad in an interview he gave to the Qatari newspaper *al-Watan* on April 24, 2008.¹⁴

Since the Israeli-Syrian peace process stopped in 2000, Syria has demanded that Israel commit to full withdrawal from the Golan Heights to the lines of June 4, 1967, in other words, to the shores of the Sea of Galilee, as a condition for renewing peace talks between the two countries. In an address he gave on July 17, 2007 to the Syrian People’s Assembly at the start of his second term as president, Bashar detailed how he proposed to progress on this matter if Israel was indeed interested in renewing peace talks: “The first option is a public declaration of the Israeli prime minister to the Israeli public saying that peace with Syria means returning all of the land [the Golan Heights] and an Israeli withdrawal to the lines of June 4, 1967. The second option is giving a written pledge – similar to the Rabin deposit [which would guarantee, at the conclusion of the negotiations, the full return to the Syrians of the Golan Heights up to the lines of June 4, 1967]. The third option, which is the required minimum as far as Syria is concerned, is the existence of secret and indirect contacts with Israel, i.e., indirect contacts through a mediating country with a view to arriving at an acceptable approach with regard to the negotiations and their results.”

Bashar added that “in these negotiations we will define the June 4 lines on the map, and it is clear that all our land must be returned. We do not believe we can hold talks with Israel as long as we do not know what they are based on, and what they are aimed at. After all, we did not have any trust in the Israelis to begin with, and therefore, they must at least provide a pledge like the Rabin deposit, or give us something in writing, so we can assure ourselves that we will not find ourselves in a situation where we are again discussing the principle of returning land [that clearly should be returned to us], but that we are discussing other issues, such as drawing

Olmert became the fifth Israeli prime minister who committed himself to Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

the lines of June 4, 1967 on the map, security arrangements, and so on, as was the case in the 1990s.”¹⁵

Why did the Syrians opt to publicize the promise Olmert conveyed via the Turkish prime minister? There are several possible answers. First, Syria feared that sooner or later the existence of the secret channel between the two countries would be leaked to the Israeli media, and therefore sought to preempt this possibility and not find itself in a defensive position, perceived as being in a hurry to sign a peace agreement with Israel from a position of weakness. Second and more important, it is possible that the Syrians tried to assess Olmert's seriousness and his potential ability to gain public approval for such a move. The fact that the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem did not deny the existence of such a message from Olmert to the Syrians constituted indirect confirmation of the report. What is clear is that the Syrians did not care about surprising and embarrassing Olmert, as helping the Israeli prime minister gain public approval was never on the Syrian agenda.

On April 25, 2008, two days after the surprising report from Damascus about Olmert's message to the Syrians and his willingness to fulfill Rabin's deposit, it was reported that the Israeli police had launched a new investigation against the prime minister. What quickly became known as the Talansky affair snowballed to the point of ending Olmert's term of office.¹⁶ In Israel there were many who accused the prime minister of using his efforts to further talks with Syria as a means of diverting public attention from his police investigations,¹⁷ but in fact Olmert's endeavors to further peace talks with Syria preceded the opening of this investigation, which apparently took him completely by surprise.

The police inquiry notwithstanding, Olmert continued working to advance Syria-Israel negotiations. On May 21, 2008, the prime minister made a dramatic announcement in the Knesset about the renewal of peace talks between Israel and Syria, as yet indirect and with Turkish mediation.¹⁸ For its part, Damascus made do with publishing a laconic announcement by the Syrian news agency about the renewal of talks between the Israeli and Syrian governments.¹⁹ From this point on, the two countries began to hold indirect peace talks in Turkey with Turkish mediation. Israel was represented by the head of the Prime Minister's

Office, Yoram Turbowicz, and his political advisor, Shalom Turjeman, and the Syrians were represented by the legal advisor to the Syrian Foreign Ministry, Riad Daoudi, who was involved in peace talks with Israel since the 1990s.²⁰

Although Israel and Syria did not provide details the talks apparently focused on the respective conditions for renewing direct and formal negotiations, and possibly also on technical aspects of such future talks. Olmert conducted this interchange with total autocracy, notwithstanding across-the-board objections to his moves on the part of senior ministers in the government, particularly Defense Minister Ehud Barak, Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz, and Vice Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary Tzipi Livni. The latter even publicly admitted that she was not involved in the contact with Syria, and that she believed it was not right to renew talks with Syria and thereby reward Damascus without its altering its conduct and its attitude towards Israel.²¹

Indeed, despite the renewal of indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria, there was no recognizable change in Syrian's posture on any of the issues in question. Syria continued to act to strengthen its strategic pact with Iran, and Bashar al-Asad even visited Tehran in early August 2008 to ease Iranian concern over a possible change in Syrian's stance.²² Syria continued to supply advanced weapons to Hizbollah, and it also continued to display antagonism towards Israel. An indication of this reserved and even hostile attitude occurred at the summit of the heads of Mediterranean states in Paris in July 2008. The Syrian president went to the summit as a highly desirable guest who enjoyed widespread support. After all, two months earlier he had helped advance the Doha agreement that ended the two year-long political crisis in Lebanon. In addition, he earned a certain legitimacy given the indirect peace talks with Israel. Nonetheless, during the summit discussions Bashar openly shunned fellow participant Ehud Olmert, avoiding meeting him or shaking his hand.²³

Yet Bashar expressed a willingness to reach a peace settlement with Israel, and it appears that this willingness was backed by a wide consensus within the Syrian public that emerged during the 1990s, according to which an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement is in Syria's interest.²⁴ However, Bashar's willingness did not reflect determination and certainly not a hunger for peace, and it is even possible that making

peace with Israel is beyond his capability and demands attributes he does not have, including creative and proactive thinking, willingness for dramatic and groundbreaking moves, and a correct understanding of Israel's internal reality. Furthermore, over a long period and certainly immediately following the war in Lebanon, it appeared that Bashar felt he was in a position of strength, and therefore had no need to make any concessions to Israel with regard to conditions for peace talks or a future peace settlement. The result was that like his father, Bashar did not display any willingness to take confidence-building steps that would make it easier for the Israeli leadership to muster support within the Israeli public for a peace process with Syria and primarily for the price Israel would have to pay for a peace agreement, full withdrawal from the Golan Heights.

In addition, Syrian willingness to achieve peace with Israel did not and still does not indicate a desire for change in Syrian regime policy, in terms of foreign policy – relations with the Arab world, Western Europe, and the United States – or in terms of the regime's domestic social and economic policy. The peace initiative of Egyptian president Sadat in November 1977 was part of a more comprehensive change in the policy and approach of the Egyptian president. In making peace with Israel, Sadat was looking to bring about a change in Egypt's internal and external reality, yet the aim of the Syrian regime – led by Hafez al-Asad and subsequently his son – is the exact opposite: to maintain the Syrian status quo, and thereby ensure the continued existence of the Baath regime led by members of the Asad family.

End of the Olmert Era: The End of Peace Talks with Syria

On July 30, 2008, Ehud Olmert announced that he would not be a candidate for the position of prime minister in the September 17 internal Kadima party elections. This effectively ended his current political career and put an end to the contact he was looking to maintain with Syria.²⁵

It seems that for now Syria is the winner from the renewed dialogue with Israel. First, the Syrians have won legitimacy and sanction, helping them improve their international standing and to some extent even freeing themselves from their isolation of recent years. Second, Syria seems to have managed to extract from Prime Minister Olmert

a commitment to a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, to the lines of June 4, 1967, as a condition for starting indirect dialogue with Israel. Thus, Olmert became the fifth Israeli prime minister – preceded by Rabin, Peres, Netanyahu, and Barak – who committed himself to Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. This commitment will presumably be presented to any future Israeli prime minister seeking to renew negotiations with Syria. All this is without Syria having given Israel anything in return: Syria has not severed ties with Iran, stopped supplying arms to Hizbollah, or tempered its hostile attitude towards Israel.

What emerges from Ehud Olmert's attempt to advance the Syrian option? First, it appears that Syria has an interest in advancing the political process with Israel. This interest is based and even contingent on recognition among the Syrian leadership, but also among public opinion in Damascus, that a peace agreement with Israel is likely to serve Syrian interests, particularly recovery of the Golan Heights, and therefore it should not be ruled out. This is a significant difference between Damascus and Hamas, Hizbollah, or Iran, who are not interested in negotiations with Israel, let alone a political settlement with it. Indeed, in an interview to *Der Spiegel* in September 2006, Bashar al-Asad explained his position by saying, "I do not share the view that Israel should be wiped off the map. After all, we want to make peace with it. I believe that any time is the right time for making peace, especially following a war. Syria and Israel can live side by side in harmony and recognize each other's existence. We held talks in the 1990s, and we do not conduct negotiations with a country only in order to wipe it off the map afterwards."²⁶

Syria continues to stand firm and refuses to take any confidence-building steps that could convince the Israeli public that its desire for peace is sincere.

Second, and notwithstanding this stance, Damascus has not exhibited any real hunger for peace or shown determination or strong political desire to reach a settlement with Israel. Syria makes do, therefore, with a display of interest, even though it sometimes seems confined to the theoretical, in examining the possibility of advancing the peace process with Israel.

Third, the Syrian terms for achieving a peace agreement were and still are stiff and uncompromising. Syria is demanding the return of

the Golan Heights in their entirety, as well as the Sea of Galilee shore that the Syrians held until 1967. Exaggerated assessments in Israel on Syria's possible willingness to demonstrate flexibility on this issue have been shown time and again to have no basis in reality. Moreover, Syria has not shown willingness to commit clearly and unambiguously to distancing itself from the axis of evil and from its pact with Iran and Hizbollah. At most it has been hinted that Damsacus would be willing to cool these ties, which one might assume would in any event occur once Syria signed a peace treaty with Israel.

Fourth, the Syrians continue to stand firm and refuse to take any confidence-building steps that could convince the Israeli public that their desire for peace is sincere. The picture of Syrian president Bashar al-Asad turning his back on the prime minister of Israel in Paris in July 2008 during the summit conveys this better than a thousand words.

In this context one should mention the interview given by Bashar al-Asad to al-Jazeera on July 14, 2008, in which he explained that: "From our point of view, the word 'normalization' does not exist. We have talked about normal relations (*aadiya*) from the start of the peace process. You [the interviewer] can call them natural relations, or use the term 'normalization' (*tatbi*). It really doesn't matter. It is of no substance. We are talking about normal relations. What is meant by normal relations? This means relations like those that exist between two countries. There are embassies, there are relations, there are agreements. Relations can deteriorate and alternatively they can improve. They can be warm or cold. This relates to the sovereignty of every country. Thus we call these relations normal relations."²⁷

Finally, it is clear that without active American involvement in Israeli-Syrian negotiations it will be difficult for the sides to progress. After all, the Americans are the ones who are supposed to cover the peace costs, as well as exert pressure on the sides to soften their positions during the process. However, President Bush's position on the Syrian-Israeli negotiations is fundamentally negative. One can assume that Bashar al-Asad's declarations of support for Russia during the crisis in Georgia in mid-August 2008 did not help to change this negative attitude. The position of the next US administration will emerge only after it is established and formulates its policy during the first half of 2009.

This means that Syria is not expected to go out of its way to advance a peace process with Israel, and that it is the Israeli prime minister who will have to bear the brunt of advancing the negotiations. This is based, of course, on the assumption that s/he believes in the importance and contribution of an Israel-Syria treaty to Israel's security. Needless to say that such a move without public backing, and to the unconcealed displeasure of the United States, appears a foretold failure.

Against this backdrop it seems that regardless of who is Israel's next prime minister, it is hard to see who under these conditions will be able to advance a peace process with Syria. A breakthrough in negotiations with the Syrians, therefore, needs a move similar to that made by Sadat in his historic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 – of which Bashar al-Asad is not capable – and, alternatively, American or Israeli determination to achieve a breakthrough for peace, a determination that does not appear to be on the horizon.

Notes

1. See Gabriel Siboni, "The Military Campaign in Lebanon," in Shlomo Brom and Meir Elran, eds., *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2007), pp. 61-76. See also forecasts of an expected war during 2007 in *Haaretz*, December 22, 2006, and *Maariv*, December 29, 2006.
2. See *Haaretz*, September 7, 9, 2007; *Yediot Ahronot*, September 7, 9, 2007. See also SANA (Syrian Arabic News Agency, Damascus), September 6, 2007.
3. See SANA, August 15, 2006, and *Tishrin*, August 16, 2006.
4. See al-Jazeera (Saudi Arabia), March 19, 2007, and an interview given by Bashar al-Asad to *Der Spiegel*, September 24, 2006. See also *Haaretz*, December 22, 29, 2006, and see position paper "Is There a Syrian Option? Thoughts on the Future of Israeli-Syrian Relations," New Horizons, Berl Katznelson Foundation, November 2006, www.ofakim.org.il.
5. See Eyal Zisser, *Commanding Syria: Bashar al-Asad and the First Years in Power* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 148-71; see also Reuters, April 17, July 1, 2001; *Haaretz*, October 17, 2003.
6. See SANA, September 6, 2007.
7. SANA, September 17, 2007. See also an interview given by Bashar to the Tunisian newspaper *al-Sharouk* (Tunisia), October 11, 2007.
8. See Reuters, April 24, 26, 27, 2008; *Haaretz*, April 26, 2008.
9. See an interview given by Bashar al-Assad to BBC TV, October 1, 2007.
10. See *Haaretz*, November 26, 29, 2007.
11. See *Yediot Ahronot*, February 14, 2008, August 3, 2008; *al-Khayat* (London),

- February 14, 2008, August 5, 2008.
12. See *Yediot Ahronot*, April 4, 11, 2008; *Haaretz*, March 7, April 4, 2008.
13. See *Yediot Ahronot*, April 25, May 23, 2008.
14. See *al-Watan* (Qatar), April 24, 2008; see also *al-Jazeera*, April 13, 24, 2008.
15. SANA, July 17, 2007; see also *Tishrin* (Damascus), July 18, 2007.
16. *Yediot Ahronot* May 9, 11, 2008.
17. *Haaretz*, April 25, May 22, 2008.
18. *Yediot Ahronot*, May 22, 2008.
19. SANA, May 21, 2008.
20. *Haaretz*, July 4, 2008.
21. *Yediot Ahronot*, August 1, 22, 2008.
22. SANA, August 4, 2008.
23. *Haaretz*, July 14, 2008.
24. See, for example, an article by Syrian intellectual Sadiq al-Azm, "The View from Damascus," *The New York Review of Books* 67, no. 10, June 15, 2000.
25. *Haaretz*, August 1, 2008.
26. *Der Spiegel*, September 24, 2006.
27. *Al-Jazeera TV*, July 14, 2008.