

# Renewed Negotiations with Syria: Currently Not in Israel's Interest

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I am among those who believe that a political settlement is a good thing. Rafael (Rafal) Eitan was once asked if he supported a peace settlement between Israel and Syria based on the principle of land for peace, and he said, "Certainly. If they give us more land, I will be happy to go toward them in peace. . . "

A peace treaty is better than a situation without peace. It is certainly better than war, but one must determine what kind of peace is offered versus the alternatives. In fact, doesn't the peace agreement on the Syrian agenda create a reality that is liable to lead to war more quickly than the absence of an agreement?

One of the issues most commonly raised in Israeli public discourse is: is Basher Asad serious? is he interested? is he willing? This is followed by: is he capable? These are important questions, but not the most important ones. The most important question is: *what do we want?* Answering this question requires a brief look at Israel's interests in this situation compared with other alternatives. My conclusion differs from the common assumption that if Asad is serious we should initiate peace talks with Syria.

There are five reasons why Israel should not engage now in negotiations with Syria over a peace treaty similar to the one discussed seven years ago, and especially if there are chances that the negotiations might succeed.

## What the Agreement Lacks

The first reason concerns what *cannot* be obtained through an Israeli-Syrian peace settlement. First, a treaty with Syria will not remove the Iranian threat, which is mainly a nuclear threat. Syria needs Iran but Iran does not need Syria, and

certainly not on the nuclear issue. Whether or not Iran pursues its nuclear ambitions depends on matters in which Syria plays practically no part or none at all. Thus, this threat is talked about – with some justification – as a viable and growing threat, and it will continue irrespective of a peace treaty with Syria or lack thereof.

A peace treaty with Syria does not solve the Palestinian problem. The dispute between Israel and Syria is ultimately a territorial dispute between two countries. There are

dozens of such disputes around the world. Some have been going on for decades and even centuries. There are conflicts that are solved, some that are not solved, and some will never be settled.

Not only would a solution to the Israeli-Syrian conflict not help solve Israel's problem with the Palestinians; it even exacerbates almost every aspect of the problem. If Israel advances on one axis, it is unlikely to be able to advance on another. Yet to the Palestinians, a resolution of the Syrian dispute would be a kind

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of slap in the face and would likely prompt a new and growing intifada. In addition, if there were any thoughts of reaching a peace agreement at some time with the Palestinians based on borders that are not identical to the June 4, 1967 borders, reaching an agreement with the Syrians that validates the borders of June 4, 1967 will make it very difficult to effect the changes needed in a resolution with the Palestinians.

A peace treaty with Syria will not solve the problem of Lebanon, and herein lies the big difference from the past. Had Israel reached a peace settlement with Syria six or seven years ago, it could have done so with Lebanon as well. As such, the Lebanese would have been forced – together with Hizbollah – to swallow the bitter pill and agree to a Syrian dictate, including disarmament of Hizbollah. That was then, while Syria was in control in Lebanon. Today the situation is different. Now Israel could reach a peace agreement with Syria without its impacting in any way – and certainly not decisively – on the situation in Lebanon. The Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon bolstered Hizbollah and reinforced Iranian intervention in Lebanon. Thus, if there is a peace treaty with Syria, Hizbollah will remain unaffected, and the Lebanese problem will be aggravated.

Peace with Syria will not lead to any comprehensive agreement vis-à-vis Israel's relations with the Arab world, as the root of the hostility between Israel and the Arab states

that have not signed a peace treaty with Israel is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus if this problem is not solved, another peace treaty with an additional country – Syria – will at best be like the treaty with Jordan; in other words it will not impact measurably and certainly not solve any significant problem.

Finally, an agreement would not solve the problem of Israel's standing in the world, as in this area as well, a kind of myth has evolved, namely, the real problem is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a treaty with one more country will not enhance Israel's international standing at all.

These five interests will not be achieved or advanced through a peace agreement with Syria. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether the give and take of direct negotiations with Syria is in Israel's interest. In this context, there are four more reasons why Israel does not currently have any interest in peace talks with Syria.

### **The American Factor**

Of lesser importance though not irrelevant is the fact that right now, the United States has no interest in encouraging a peace treaty between Israel and Syria. This is a secondary consideration, since if peace with Syria had immediate value for Israel, Israel would try to persuade the US to change its mind on the matter. But as of now, the clear American approach – both the official approach and the behind-the-

scenes one – is that the United States has no interest in Israel arriving at a peace agreement with Syria. Would it be right to “confront” America over this particular issue? And if so, would an agreement with Syria earn us all the potential America rewards, compared with the benefits bestowed by the United States following agreements it was eager to promote?

### **The Agreement's Lifespan**

At issue is the potential stability of such an agreement and what would happen if it did not last. Syria is a minority-ruled country. The minority is the Alawi sect, which comprises only 14 percent of the country's population and is looked upon by the Sunni majority as inferior and not genuinely Muslim. In a situation of this sort there is no certainty with regard to the fate of such a treaty once the rule of the country is removed from the Alawis.

Since Basher Asad assumed the presidency, two main factors have kept the Alawi minority in power. The first is the support of Iran, though this could be withdrawn at any point. This support is not only military and political, but also of a religious nature in the sense that the Shiite establishment in Iran recognizes the Alawis as legitimate Muslims and therefore does not challenge the Islamic authenticity of the regime.

The second factor is that Syria is ruled by an emergency regime that enables the government to inter-

vene anywhere where there is commercial, financial, or political activity. All this is based on the argument that an Israeli attack is expected and that emergency laws are essential for defense of the country. Once there is peace between Israel and Syria and thousands of Israeli tourists begin swarming into Syria, this argument will no longer be relevant. The Sunni majority, with a considerable degree of justification, will demand its share of power and will ultimately assume control in Syria. The Sunnis' strength will increase dramatically with the collapse of their great enemy, the Alawi regime. There is no guarantee that a Sunni

What is deterrence? What is the model of the security agreement? The model is based on the sufficient eastward withdrawal of the Syrian tanks. If Syria decided to breach the peace treaty and move its tanks to the Golan Heights, Israel would have sufficient time to dispatch its forces, which would be stationed to the west of the Jordan River, and be able to repossess the Golan Heights. This would mean that the battle between Israel and the Syrians would once again take place on the Golan Heights. However, this approach is based on four assumptions that are problematic at best, if not outright unlikely.

mulate a security concept on faith in perfect intelligence.

- *The Israeli government, as soon as it identifies any intention of war, will make the right decisions, including mobilizing the reserve forces and instructing the IDF to move into Syrian territory on the Golan Heights.* The "game" between us and the Syrians is not balanced. The Golan Heights can be demilitarized on both sides, but it would be Syrian. Entry there by the Syrian army would only be an infringement of a treaty; Israeli entry there would be a declaration of war. Thus, taking such a decision quickly and in real time is problematic.

- *Israel can comfortably contend with a new military reality on the Golan Heights.* In fact, the relatively simple current reality (an area that is mostly uninhabited, without irrigation channels and other "civilian obstacles") would probably change and the military difficulties would increase accordingly.

Any peace agreement will naturally impact on capabilities and deterrence. Assume that the terms of the settlement in question are the same ones we would have reached in 2000. This settlement offers a solution for one security problem but does not solve two far more serious security problems. The settlement provides a solution for the issue of Syrian tanks. Assume that the Syrian tanks will move back to an adequate point, and that deterrence – despite its four (problematic) assumptions – will be maintained. Even this optimistic scenario does not solve the

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government of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria would honor a peace treaty signed by "the non-legitimate heretics of the Alawi minority." In other words, Israel may sign a peace treaty whereby the chances of its longevity are highly doubtful.

## Security Issues

Even if it is possible to reach a security agreement between Israel and Syria, I believe such an agreement would be unreasonable, and I would even define it as dangerous. There are two explanations for this: the deterrence concept, and erosion of capabilities and deterrence.

- *The Syrians will adhere religiously to the agreement and the demilitarization and will not undermine the treaty.* This seems to me highly unlikely, if not impossible.

- *If there is any Syrian movement or there is a Syrian decision to engage in military action, Israel's intelligence will identify and interpret this correctly.* The world, including the Middle East, has witnessed dozens of examples of intelligence errors in understanding the other side's intentions. This is aggravated by an element of deceit, whereby the other sides tries to "convince" you that the real story is otherwise. It is very risky to for-

two more serious problems.

The first is the arsenal of surface-to-surface missiles in Syria, including missiles with chemical capabilities that can strike any location in Israel. The second is that as soon as the Syrians control the whole of the Golan Heights, a large number of towns like Bint Jbail will be established along the Jordan River. This will enable them to maintain many "civilian" soldiers with advanced anti-tank or anti-aircraft weapons. No demilitarization will be able to supervise such a development. Then, even if Israel succeeds in maintaining deterrence and had enough time to take the Golan Heights (before the Syrian tanks get there), it would have to break through a line of towns like Bint Jbail built along the Jordan River. There is no appropriate military answer to this situation, and again, a demilitarization settlement does not provide a total solution.

In terms of security, agreeing to such a treaty would mean taking an unreasonable risk unless Israel changes its security concept relating to warfare on the Golan Heights. This means that from now on, Israel understands that should war break out with Syria it will not be waged along the Golan Heights ridge and eastward; rather, it would start from the Jordan River and proceed towards Safed and Tiberias, "and we will somehow manage." While it is true that Israel encountered this challenge in 1948 and 1967, I would not advise revisiting this situation a

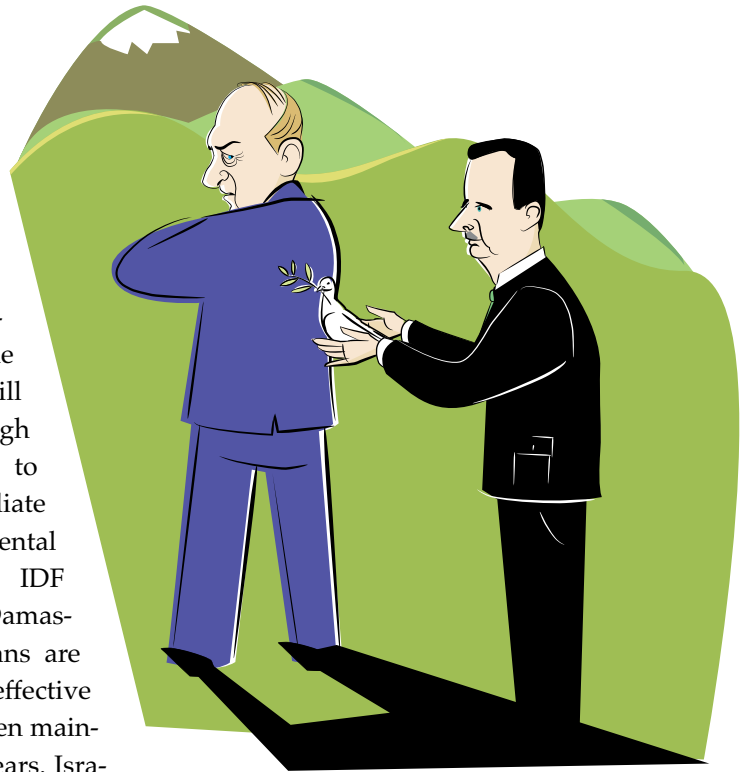
third time.

Today Israel's security concept vis-à-vis Syria is based on the fact that as long as the IDF is stationed on the Golan Heights, the military result will be attained through Israel's ability to create an immediate threat to governmental assets, including IDF forces reaching Damascus. As the Syrians are aware of this, an effective deterrence has been maintained over the years. Israel's solution to the Syrian threat, including the threat of surface-to-surface missiles and non-conventional weapons, is the deterrence capability, meaning that the Syrians are aware of the price its government is liable to pay if it starts a war. When the military reality changes, Syria's temptation to attack will increase.

A stable reality, with or without a treaty, is maintained (particularly in the Middle East) only when the cost of breaching it is greater than the expected benefit. It is not maintained only because there is an agreement or because there is international supervision. I do not see how such a mechanism can be generated if Israel withdraws from the Golan Heights.

### **The Ethos**

Ethos is also a subject that should be



addressed. The question is in what sort of country we in Israel want to live. Israel may be able to reach a peace agreement, and assume that solutions can be found on the Golan Heights and elsewhere. The question is whether we want to live in a country that within thirty or forty years will be full of concrete, with all that that entails. The Israeli people have a genuine need to live in an area with space, views, water, and agriculture and, yes, rich in Jewish history.

In this respect the Golan Heights is more than a security requirement. It is part of the ethos of the Israeli and there is no need to apologize for it. I was asked about this in a radio interview: "Wait a minute, so what are you saying?" the interviewer

asked me, “are we doomed to stay on the Golan Heights forever?” – as if we were talking about some form of punishment.

### **What Then?**

These five reasons indicate to me that even if there are seemingly positive conditions, in the sense that Basher Asad is willing and possibly able, it would not be right to reach a peace agreement based on such substantive, tangible Israeli concessions for such poor returns.

At this point, the necessary question is: Will Israel be in this situation forever? And does this eternity likely guarantee more wars? The answer goes beyond the issue addressed here and touches on the general challenge of settling the Israeli-Arab conflict – and whether it can be solved only in accordance with the Arab dogma whereby Israel returns all the occupied territories in return for peace. In other words, there can only be peace if Israel gives up all the territories and returns to the 1967 borders. I think this is the wrong narrative.

This incorrect version is not ours. Unlike others, I do not believe that this is or has to be the only narrative.

### **Postscript: The Lebanon Issue**

My last point concerns the issue of Lebanon. It seems that one of the parameters that has changed in the last seven years, even if there is dis-

agreement over other aspects to the argument presented here, is Syria’s ability to compel Lebanon, all its forces there notwithstanding, to honor an agreement between Syria and Israel.

About two and half to three years ago there was debate in Israel about whether Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon was a positive development. The decided position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was that it was good for Israel that the Syrians leave Lebanon. This position was adopted by Prime Minister Sharon and became official policy.

There were others who thought differently. It wasn’t as if Israel was the main factor and certainly other parties decided on Syria’s withdrawal of its forces from Lebanon, but Israel undoubtedly encouraged them as much as it could. I believe that was a serious historic error. It would have been better for Israel had Syria remained in Lebanon. The Syrian interest in Lebanon was at least on a par with its interest in the Golan Heights. It would have been better for the Syrians to be engaged in maintaining their assets in Lebanon. Now, having lost them, what remains is to fight for the next asset – the Golan Heights.

There is another issue here, and I will inject a personal angle at this point. I did not participate in any negotiations with Syria, but I was part of the team that, as a secondary effort, prepared a possible treaty between Israel and Lebanon. In other

words, in 2000, talks were progressing with Syria at the same time that a draft of a treaty with Lebanon was being prepared. At the time I was head of the IDF’s Operations Branch, which addressed the security implications. The position was approved by the political leadership. We believed that Syrian presence in Lebanon was preferred, or at least, Israel had no interest in insisting on the opposite. We said: as long as the status quo in Lebanon is maintained and the Syrians stay there and move no further south and do not introduce their air force or missiles, the situation is tolerable end even desirable.

Syria’s withdrawal about two years ago started a process that is, of course, bad for the Syrians. However, this does not necessarily mean it is good for us. This shows that when it comes to interests, there are sometimes strange convergences. The withdrawal of the Syrians from Lebanon did not match Syria’s interest or Israel’s. The sum-zero thinking that if it is bad for our enemies it is good for us is not necessarily correct. Israel’s enthusiasm two years ago in encouraging the Americans, the French, and the UN to pressure the Syrians to withdraw from Lebanon was a mistake.