Assessing the Autumn Chill on the Syrian Track

by David Pollock **(/experts/david-pollock)**

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Brief Analysis

As Secretary Christopher meets Syrian Foreign Minister Shar'a in New York, it is clear that a deep chill has descended over Syrian-Israeli peacemaking in just the few weeks since the chorus of calls, at the Oslo B signing ceremonies, for President Assad to join the expanding "circle of peace." Encouraging words have been replaced by sober statements about how difficult this process is likely to be. Syria has maintained its refusal to schedule a promised follow-up meeting with Israeli military experts, leaving direct talks in limbo since last July. The State Department announced that Secretary Christopher would not stop in Damascus on his Mideast trip at the end of this month. Shar'a delivered a thinly veiled threat of retaliation in case Israel's separate deals threatened Arab interests. And in the past two weeks, as if on cue, nine Israeli soldiers -- nearly half a "normal" year's toll -- were killed in south Lebanon by Hezbollah, which operates under Syrian protection.

It is hard to prove whether this was a deliberate Syrian signal or merely a "coincidence," as one Hezbollah spokesman put it. But there is no mistaking the tougher than usual rhetorical response on both sides. The controlled Damascus press not only justified the killings but also likened Israelis to Nazis, and Chief of Staff Shihabi reportedly warned of war. An Israeli cabinet communique explicitly denounced Syria for supporting terrorism. In short, the whole thrust of Syrian-Israeli interaction has abruptly deteriorated from peacemaking to saber-rattling. Understanding what this portends begins with how Assad views the situation.

Assad's Calculus:

There is no plausible reason why Assad would want a military confrontation with Israel anytime soon. He implied as much in an intriguing interview published in Al-Ahram October 11: he did not threaten to end the peace talks, let alone invoke a war option. Rather, Assad convincingly projected an air of almost infinite patience. On the other hand, there are plenty of plausible reasons for Assad to postpone a peace accord with Israel. Among them: an unsettled succession situation at home; uncertainty about how new developments in Iraq, or in the Palestinian Authority, will affect his own position; and unwillingness to take personally painful and perhaps politically risky steps toward normalizing relations with "the Zionist enemy." For the short term, Assad may well be making a simple calculation of "no pain, no gain": there are no urgent incentives, either negative or positive, for him to conclude a deal with Israel just now.

In his interview, not surprisingly, Assad did not cite these reasons for delay but emphasized Israel's continued

interest in retaining ground-based early warning stations on the Golan. This bone of contention arose again during the last set of Syrian-Israeli talks -- and it may have led Assad to conclude that Rabin was not ready to close a deal. The reasons for that, Assad tells Al-Ahram, are related to internal Israeli affairs.

On this subject, again, Assad's omissions are as interesting as his actual remarks. He does not repeat the common Syrian refrain that all Israelis are alike, allowing instead that Labor has a better, "calmer" style of negotiating than did Likud. He does not absolutely rule out any possibility of progress in the coming year. But he does say that "we can move after the [Israeli] elections more than now."

Assad's selective focus on Israel's upcoming election, which mirrors that of many other observers, merits attention. First, for nearly two years past, any deal with Syria had to pass the test of Israeli public approval, even without an election in the offing. Second, there is much that Assad himself could do to affect the chances for that approval, even if a deal is not on the horizon. And third, if he allows the atmosphere to darken further, the substantial progress achieved to date could unravel in the heat of Israeli domestic politics -- making it all the more useful to maintain some diplomatic momentum on the Syrian-Israeli track.

The Golan Referendum Issue:

The immediate issue in this context is not Israel's next national election. It is Prime Minister Rabin's informal but very public commitment, announced in January 1994, to hold a referendum about any "significant" Golan withdrawal. His intention was presumably to fend off the increasingly vocal opposition to such a step. But the effect has been to add a new uncertainty to the equation, because the outcome of such a referendum is in doubt. To be sure, the recent trend in Israeli public opinion is clearly toward greater willingness for some territorial concessions on the Golan. Yet a majority of the Israeli Jewish public would still refuse full withdrawal as the price for peace with Syria.

There is some evidence, however, that an Israeli government imprimatur on such an accord, the satisfaction of certain security conditions attached to it, and the very act of voting on an historic peace agreement would all boost popular support somewhat. That combination, according to a reliable July poll, would leave the Israeli Jewish public surprisingly closely divided, with opponents of a total Golan pullout just a few percentage points (53 percent vs. 47 percent) in the lead. And that, in turn, might allow Israel's Arab citizens (typically about 10 percent of total turnout) to give a "Golan for peace" proposition the winning edge -- though this result is far from certain.

Some Israeli politicians question the validity of granting Israel's Arabs such a pivotal role. Rabin himself, by contrast, has disavowed as "racist" any such objections. And, indeed, his government has often relied on the five seats of Israeli Arab parties in cliffhanger Knesset votes -- including the one that recently rejected a bill requiring more than a bare majority in a Golan referendum. While that rescued Rabin from a worse domestic constraint on the Syrian track, it also refocused public attention on the prospect of a referendum. Rabin's problem with that is not the composition but the closeness of the expected vote.

What Would Work and What Wouldn't:

Assuming that success on the Syrian track requires broader popular backing, what will bring that about? First is an end to terrorism in south Lebanon, cited by fully 90 percent of the Israeli Jewish public as a "very important" condition. The contrary claim, that terrorism will soften Israel's posture toward Syria, was dismissed by Rabin as "a terrible mistake." In fact, a poll published last Friday shows a two-to-one majority backing a military response in Lebanon, as usual, and wanting to tighten rather than loosen Israel's hold on the "security zone" there. Similarly, the PLO-Israel track record during the last two years indicates that Israel can be more flexible when its Arab interlocutor is working to impede rather than abet terrorism. (By comparison, a mere third of Israelis attach great value to U.S. peacekeeping troops on the Golan. Other recent surveys have consistently shown around half saying this would

make no difference, and another quarter saying it would make a Golan deal actually less attractive. Clearly, this issue is much more salient to the politicians and pundits than to the Israeli public.)

But there are two other features of a deal with Syria that would be widely (70+ percent) valued by the Israeli public. These are: first, security measures endorsed by Israel's military leadership; and second, steps toward normalization before Israel's withdrawal is complete. To the extent that Assad desires to keep open the option of an agreement, these are areas where he could demonstrably make a contribution.

David Pollock is the Washington Institute's 1995/96 Scholar in Residence, on leave from USIA. These are purely his personal views, and not necessarily U.S. policy. ❖

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