

Talk to Syria

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Talk to senior Israeli military officials, as I have recently, about how the Israeli government will respond to regional threats, and one hears the same refrain: "Wait for the Winograd findings." Well, we now know what they are. The Winograd Commission, established last fall to investigate Israel's war with Lebanon last summer, issued its preliminary report last week. Among other things, Winograd holds the senior political and military leadership responsible for a hasty, poorly thought-out decision to go to war; for failing to devise strategic goals that were either achievable or connected to the military plans; and for not having the military prepared for the kind of war it had to fight.

Given these conclusions, many now wonder how long Ehud Olmert will remain Israel's prime minister. I wonder, however, how they will influence Israel's response to the multiplicity of challenges which loom on the horizon. How long will Israel tolerate Hamas's buildup of arms and longer-range rockets in Gaza? Will it continue to passively watch as Hezbollah is re-supplied with a new arsenal of weaponry in direct violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701? How will it respond, if at all, to the signs -- significant new arms buildup, qualitatively different exercises, heightened readiness levels, and redeployment of forces -- that Syria is positioning itself for the possibility of conflict with Israel? And, is the time approaching when Israel decides that the international efforts to stop the Iranian nuclear program are progressing too slowly and that it must act on its own?

I have little doubt that the Israel Defense Forces are learning the tactical and logistical lessons of the war last summer. But the real question is how it will apply these lessons to fight -- or avoid -- the next conflict.

Paradoxically, I see two competing impulses among former and current Israeli security officials: Israel cannot wait for Hamas or Hezbollah to continue to acquire the military means that will make another round very costly to Israel. Alternatively, now is the time to reach out to Syria.

The former impulse is driven, not only by the need to minimize the cost of what Hamas or Hezbollah can impose on Israel, but also by the perception that Israel must restore its deterrent. Proving itself in a new conflict with either or both would have an effect on Syria and potentially even Iran -- or so this thinking goes. The latter impulse is that another round with Hezbollah may well be inevitable, but this time Syria will not be allowed to stoke the conflict and sit on the sidelines with impunity. As such, Israel, according to the military officials I spoke with, could be at war with

Syria in the coming year, and if Syrian President Bashar Assad is willing to talk, shouldn't Israel engage Syria and see if a war can be averted? (For some, there is the possible added benefit that discussions with Syria might also be useful for weaning Syria away from Iran and for imposing limits on Hezbollah and Hamas.)

To date, the pressure within the Israeli defense establishment to talk to Syria has not persuaded Olmert to drop his opposition to such talks -- opposition that stems in no small part from the Bush administration being dead-set against the Israelis taking up Assad on his willingness to sit down with them. As far as the administration is concerned, Syria wants to use such talks, not to make peace, but to get Lebanon back and to forestall an international tribunal on the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

The Bush administration may be right. Assad may have no genuine interest in making peace with Israel; his continuing support for Hezbollah and Hamas and his bombastic rhetoric about Israel hardly suggest someone who is ready to end a conflict and accept reconciliation. But if the Israeli military is right and the prospects for war in the coming year with Syria and Hezbollah are increasing as the rearming of Hezbollah continues unabated, what exactly would be lost by testing Assad's call for talks?

Too often the Bush administration has treated "talking" as if it means conceding. But talks are not synonymous with surrender. Rather, they can be a way of exercising leverage. Consider one of the current realities in the Middle East: Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas all refuse to recognize Israel; all suggest that peace need not and should not be made with Israel; all reject a two state solution; and all claim to represent the wave of the future. What does it say about their position and their claims if Syria -- supposedly a part of their nexus -- is opting out and talking to Israel? Doesn't it suggest that, in fact, their position is not so dominant and that everything is not going their way?

Statecraft requires recognizing where one has leverage and where one's adversaries have vulnerabilities. Syria's relationship with Iran and Hezbollah is tactical not strategic. There is no guarantee that by talking, the Israelis -- or the United States -- will suddenly be able to wean Syria away from Iran or Hezbollah. It is entirely possible that neither the Israelis nor the United States can or should pay what Syria wants. But if war is an increasing possibility and if there is tactical benefit in demonstrating that even Syria feels the need to talk to Israel, it is hard to see what is lost by doing so.

On the contrary, there are at least two additional reasons for being open to such talks at this time. First, since Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has now met with the Syrian foreign minister under the umbrella of the regional conference on Iraq, it becomes harder to maintain that Israel must keep its distance. Second, in the aftermath of the Winograd interim findings, Olmert (or his successor) is not likely to be in a rush to go to war -- at least not without feeling confident that he can show the Israeli public that a war is unavoidable and that there are clear objectives that are achievable at reasonable costs. Will any Israeli leader be able to do that if they don't first take up the Syrian offer to talk?

The lesson here is that the Bush administration needs to think far more carefully about its position on talks with the Syrians. Rather than simply telling the Israelis "no," it should work out a coordinated game plan with the Israelis, including common red lines for the talks. It should coordinate with the Lebanese to reassure Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government about the purpose of the talks -- and then give them regular briefings on what takes place in them. Ultimately, the Bush administration has very little interest in an Israeli-Syrian war. Maybe it is time for it to shape an approach to negotiations and not allow either the United States or Israel to be driven into talks in a way that reduces our respective leverage. That would be an act of effective statecraft.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of the forthcoming *Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World*.

Read this op-ed at [New Republic Online](http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w070507&s=ross050707). (<http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=w070507&s=ross050707>)

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