

The Case Against Talks

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Syrrian president Bashar al-Asad is apparently proposing peace talks with Israel. His aides are knocking at Ehud Olmert's door, from a distance. They exhort him to believe that their intentions are genuine, while out of the other side of their mouths, they issue threats that they cannot wait forever, and that "all means" are legitimate when it comes to restoring the Golan Heights to Syria. They also imply that Damascus insists that the Palestinians and the Lebanese will be partners to such talks.

They try to bolster their powers of persuasion by promising self-appointed mediators that Syria is capable of "controlling" Hamas (but not Hizballah, they caution). And then they back up their threats by setting up an Iranian-style brigade of anti-tank-missile-carrying motorbikers and by accelerating the production of "Scud" missiles.

In Israel, as usual, there are those who cannot wait to grab Asad by the hand. One public opinion poll suggested that 55 percent of Israelis think it is worth giving it a try. Similar voices are making themselves heard from within the Labor party, the media, and on the margins of Olmert's Kadima party as well. How, they ask, can Israel refuse to speak peace with an enemy state that is offering to come to the negotiating table? And Olmert is finding it difficult to defend his position that this is not the appropriate time.

Indeed, this would not be a desirable step at the present stage. On the contrary, a premature resumption of negotiations with Damascus would involve tangible risks. The losses would outweigh the benefits for now.

Asad is sending signals to Israel for a simple reason: He is afraid of the international court that is supposed to be set up in the next few months to try the suspects in the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, and those believed responsible for the other political assassinations in Beirut. The Syrians well know that the U.N. investigating committee headed by Serge Brammertz is taking its time, because it already has enough evidence in hand for indictments against senior figures in Syria, including some who are members of the Asad family itself, or at least very close to it. They understand that witnesses who are willing to incriminate their seniors have been guaranteed partial immunity. The assessment of President Asad's advisers is that they have at most a year, till the end of 2007, to remove the sword dangling over their heads.

Asad is therefore working eagerly, through his allies and hangers-on in Lebanon, to prevent the government of Fouad Siniora from obtaining the Lebanese parliament's confirmation of its agreement to the terms and conditions

according to which the international court will run. The Shiite Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri simply refuses to convene the parliament for a vote, and Hizballah is threatening a wholesale resignation of 60 parliamentarians in order to close it down altogether. Moreover, Hizballah has threatened to resume in mid-January the wave of demonstrations and strikes aimed at bringing the Siniora government down.

It would be most convenient for Asad, immersed in these motions which amount to a renewal of the Syrian-Iranian hegemony over the Land of the Cedars, if Israel were to deposit with him an effective insurance certificate in the form of direct and open negotiations. Basically, Asad is asking Olmert to cover for him and his crimes, and for Syria and Hizballah to be allowed to behead the Lebanese government with Israel's silent acquiescence.

All this without a hint of a guarantee that Asad, as some in Israel's intelligence community claim, is genuinely prepared to cut his alliance with Iran and Hizballah and turn instead to the moderate Arab Sunni camp that sees Israel as a partner against the extremists. Several of those personalities who rushed to Damascus to try to mediate admit that they themselves were not at all convinced that Asad has changed his spots.

Rather, a few of them came back with the impression that Syria is afraid to cut its ties with Iran, and wants to regain the Golan even as the Asad family remains entrenched in its 26-year-old alliance with Shiite radicalism.

So why should Israel fall into Asad's arms? Would it not be better to continue insisting that Syria first shows some proof that it is serious, for example by reining in Hamas and Hizballah, instead of handing Asad an open check? Israel ought to say that it is waiting for the international court before extending a hand to a regime involved in the cruel assassination of leaders of a neighboring country. And what is the logic of asking Olmert to get into a quarrel with Bush and Chirac for the sake of the man who supplied the missiles that were fired on Haifa?

People whose opinion I generally respect are recommending that giving the Golan back to Asad will break up the Shiite "crescent" that Iran is trying to extend from Tehran, via Baghdad and Damascus, all the way to Beirut. But that is a naive illusion. To contend with this crescent, Israel needs to reach understandings with the pragmatic Arab camp, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. Lebanon's Siniora and the Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas are also counted in its ranks. This is the time to look south, not north, to find the right formula for Sunni-Israeli cooperation, and not to go for a shortcut, seeking consolation from the Asads.

Ehud Yaari is an Israel-based associate of The Washington Institute and associate editor of Jerusalem Report. He is the author of *Toward Israeli-Palestinian Disengagement and Peace by Piece: A Decade of Egyptian Policy*. ❖

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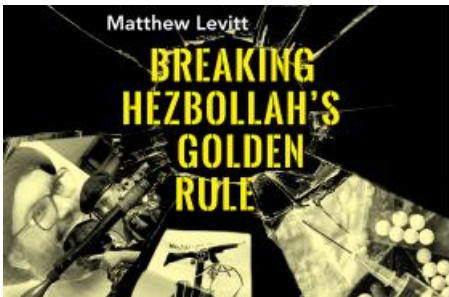
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