

The Golan Heights and Syrian-Israeli Relations:

What Does Asad Want?

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Brief Analysis

The first annual International Media Forum on the Golan Heights, held November 5-7, 2006, in the city of Quneitra on the Syria-Israel border, highlighted Syria's stated desire for the return of the entire Golan. The forum's backdrop was a litany of controversial statements made by Syrian president Bashar al-Asad about his next moves in relation to Israel.

Background

Unlike his father, who in the 1990s shifted from calls for "strategic parity" with Israel to "strategic peace," Asad has left the doors open to both peace and war. In his comments at the Arab leaders' summit in Cairo in 2000, shortly after he became president, Asad stated that Syria had two options: "peace with force" and "war with force." Throughout most of his tenure, however, he has diverged from this rhetoric somewhat to emphasize the possibility for peace -- conditional on the return of the entire Golan Heights. In 2001, at the beginning of the al-Aqsa intifada, Asad stated "no peace is possible without regaining the land [the Golan Heights] in full," underscoring that he was "open to the idea of negotiations." He picked up the same theme in fall 2004; with the U.S. invasion of Iraq eighteen months old, he explicitly stated he wanted to renew peace negotiations with Israel, without preconditions. Only since the Israel-Hizballah war have Asad and senior Syrian officials returned to the rhetoric of the president's first year in power, declaring that Syria is ready to pursue both war and peace options.

The Golan, Israel, and Syria in 2006

Even before the Israel-Hizballah war, a group calling itself "The Popular Organization for Resistance of the Israeli Occupation of the Golan" issued its first communique on June 27, 2006. The group railed against what it described as Israel's continued belligerence and rejection of UN resolutions calling for Israeli withdrawal. Interestingly, nowhere did the group call for violent or armed struggle, only an unqualified "resistance." The group posted signs at bus stops and street corners throughout Damascus, but was paid little attention by the average Syrian citizen.

Since the Israel-Hizballah war, Asad has sent mixed signals to Israel. In his September 24 interview with the German newspaper Der Spiegel, he said, "We want to make peace with Israel." The following week, in an interview with the Spanish newspaper El Pais, he gave Israel six months to achieve peace, promising war if this goal were not realized. At the same time, Asad issued a decree granting monetary compensation to any government worker who moves to the Israeli-controlled Golan, under the auspices of the International Committee of the Red Cross. In mid-October,

some media reports stated that Israel and Syria were each preparing for imminent attacks by the other. On November 7, Syrian foreign minister Walid al-Muallem declared that his country was ready to resume peace negotiations. The announcement came one day after the opening of the seventy-seventh annual conference of the Offices of the Israeli Boycott, attended by representatives of fourteen Arab countries that continue to boycott all diplomatic and commercial ties with Israel. The meeting was hosted in Damascus.

"The Gate of Peace"

It was in this environment of diametrically opposed messages that the previously mentioned international media forum, titled "The Golan -- The Gate of Peace," was held. Its location in Quneitra is significant. Since the Israelis withdrew from the city following the 1974 Israel-Syria Disengagement Agreement, Syria has preserved Quneitra as a testament to Israeli aggression, using its flattened houses, destroyed schools, and gutted hospital, church, and mosque to show the world what the Israelis did.

With this backdrop, Syrian information minister Muhsin Bilal opened the forum at Ein Tina, a small village near Quneitra that overlooks the Druze town of Majdal Shams on the Israeli side of the Golan. According to the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), conference participants spoke over loudspeakers through barbed wire to Syrians in the occupied Golan. More than 300 journalists and human rights activists from thirty countries attended the three-day conference. According to SANA, the participants took the following steps: claimed that historians had falsified history and established artificial ruins to show that the Golan was Jewish instead of Syrian; unequivocally proved the Syrian history of the Golan; emphasized the right for those Syrians banished from their homes in the Golan to return to them; criticized Israel's stealing of water from the Syrian Arab Golan; signed a final statement urging Israel to return the Golan to Syria in its entirety; and acknowledged the rights of those living in the Golan to resist occupation.

In addition to its daily coverage of the conference, SANA ran a statement by those living in the occupied Golan emphasizing their Syrian Arab identity despite living under Israeli occupation. Furthermore, SANA ran repeated reports of how the destroyed buildings in Quneitra left an impression on forum participants regarding the extent of Israeli aggression.

Analysis

Syrian rhetoric has returned to that of October 2000, when both the peace and war options had equal footing. Earlier this month, the Syrian foreign minister expressed his hope that 2007 would see a renewed Arab-Israeli peace process, but stated that he foresees a "countdown to war" if that initiative fails. Perhaps the information minister best conveyed Syria's position on the Golan issue. At the opening of the media forum, Bilal said his country could resort to armed resistance if diplomatic negotiations do not result in the return of the Golan to Syria. Unlike President Asad, who has spent months employing confusing doublespeak, Bilal was clear in conveying the Syrian desire for a peaceful settlement while not ruling out the possibility of armed conflict.

Inside Syria, the opposition to the Asad regime has viewed the latest commentary on the Golan as simply rhetoric, and farcical at that. Following the forum in Quneitra, the signatories of the Damascus Declaration -- the 2005 document calling for democracy, equal rights, free speech, and the abolition of Syria's emergency law -- harshly criticized the regime for its struggle to liberate the Golan even while it continues to persecute its own citizens. The signatories released a statement contending that the regime is busy supporting resistance outside its borders while suppressing all political activity inside. These criticisms link President Asad with the legacy of his father, Hafiz al-Asad, who was more concerned with foreign policy than domestic reform and freedoms.

Outlook

The Levant is currently in a tremendous state of flux, with the recent Israel-Hizballah war, the strengthening Iran-Syria-Hizballah axis, and the potential of a significant shift in U.S. policy toward Iraq. The United States would

benefit by peeling Syria away from Iran, but the State Department is skeptical that any substantial results can be attained through engaging Asad, whether to encourage him to change his behavior regarding Iran, Hizballah, or the movement of weapons and personnel to Iraq. Nevertheless, several European governments are reportedly trying to entice Syria away from its alliance with Iran, and it will be interesting to see what the forthcoming Iraq Study Group report, chaired by James Baker and Lee Hamilton, has to say on the subject.

Asad is a careful leader, and it would be out of character for him to embark on any armed conflict with Israel unprovoked. Having seen the ravages of Israel Defense Forces bombardments during the summer war and the subsequent flow of refugees to Syria, Asad should be well aware of the price of a war with Israel. With Iran and Hizballah's fortunes on the rise, Syria is benefiting greatly. Asad has much reason to wait and see how Hizballah fares in Lebanon's internal power struggle. At the same time, he has emphasized in the past few months that the entire Golan Heights is a precondition for any peace agreement with Israel, and he has stated that Syria is giving its options for peace and war equal consideration.

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