

# A Golan Gambit

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**P**resident Bashar al-Adad of Syria is skittishly stamping his foot like a warhorse, restrained from galloping forward only by a tight grip on the reins. He is trying to tell us that he can hardly hold back from opening a front on the Golan Heights, after more than 30 years of absolute quiet there. Emanating from his recent speeches is a distinct threat: Unless Israel agrees to start negotiations soon, Syria will take up the path of “resistance,” drawing both inspiration and practical lessons from Hizballah.

These signals were accompanied by unprecedented levels of alert in the Syrian armed forces, throughout the second Lebanese war. They were ready both to absorb an Israeli strike and to take offensive action, with Scud missiles prepared for launching. Israel never deployed significant reinforcements on the Golan, and made it clear that it did not intend to get Syria involved in the fighting. Israeli air force pilots, for example, were ordered to intercept trucks carrying weaponry from Syria to Hizballah only after they crossed the border into Lebanon.

Asad, who was very careful not to enter the war, is now ostensibly threatening to wage his own campaign. Israel has been nervous about this young leader, for whom this was the first taste of war, making a major miscalculation. The fear is that he has been brainwashed by Hassan Nasrallah’s “victory” propaganda, is envious of him, and would like a round against Israel of his own—against the advice of his late father’s generals.

In Israel, as per usual, there are politicians who couldn’t wait to shove their feet into their mouths, starting with our pathetic defense minister, Amir Peretz, and ending with our impulsive minister for internal security, Avi Dichter. They recommended opening negotiations with Syria—as if Asad should get an immediate reward for supplying Hizballah with the rockets that bombarded Haifa. An important Arab statesman remarked to me at the time, “You haven’t even managed to give back the Shaba Farms, and you’re already packing up the Golan Heights. . . ?”

Peretz, Dichter and many others are way off the mark in seeing the recent war as an effort to strike at Syria by damaging its influence and its loyalists in Lebanon. The military assault on Hizballah was only the first move in an international attempt just getting under way to disconnect Lebanon from Syria, by inspection of border crossings, by the demilitarization of southern Lebanon (even if only in theory), and by keeping up the pressure of the inquiry into the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri. Even those whose innards are burning with the desire to give up the Golan must understand that it would be better to sit down to negotiations after Asad has lost his stranglehold on Lebanon; after the Lebanese negotiating track is no longer linked to the Syrian one; and after the

rule of the anti-Syrian coalition headed by Prime Minister Siniora has stabilized, inshallah. At the height of the struggle with Asad in Lebanon, what's the point in declaring him kosher as a partner in peace?

What's more, there is a widespread misapprehension that the war in Lebanon wrought a change in Syria's strategic thinking and that Asad now believes, as he recently declared, that "there is an alternative to peace." The timeline is all wrong: Talk in Syria about the possibility of initiating terror operations or guerrilla raids across the Golan Heights frontier had been going on at least three or four months before the war. Syrian officials discussed the desirability of such a move openly on the Lebanese NEW TV station in a program broadcast from a studio in Quneitra, the capital of the Syrian Golan, last April. Shortly after that, in Damascus, the establishment of a "Popular Committee for the Liberation of the Golan" was announced, at ceremonies attended by senior government officials.

Both before the war and after it, the numerous signals of this nature have been accompanied by explicit reservations, warning that Syria has to prepare carefully, and must by no means plunge into such an adventure right away. An efficient secret organization must be set up to take responsibility, so that the Syrian government cannot be blamed. And it is stressed that the Druse former citizens of Syria living on the Golan are not at all eager to become guerrilla fighters à la Hizballah. Asad himself, and his foreign minister, Walid Muallem, have warned that drifting into such an initiative could play into the enemy's hands. At the same time, they have allowed the subject of fighting on the Golan to become the central matter of internal debate. An atmosphere is gradually being created in which Asad will find it difficult not to take any action for long.

If this is indeed the way things are going, and the lust for adventure supersedes Syria's traditional caution, Israel should persist in a hard line in Lebanon, preferably including attacking Syrian trucks carrying missile supplies to Hizballah, despite the international criticism that would arouse. It would be wiser for Israel to confront Asad on Lebanese turf, rather than among the flourishing settlements on the Golan. Moreover, it must be made clear to Asad that the first, even slightest provocation on the border will produce an immediate and harsh reaction. There will be no proportionality between the provocation and the response.

Asad might be ready to go for a "controlled" heating up of the border, up to the point of limited skirmishes with the IDF. But he has no great desire to risk a general confrontation with the Israel Air Force. He has to know that this would be only the first course on the menu.

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 \(templateC04.php?CID=125\)](#) and [Peace by Piece: A Decade of Egyptian Policy \(templateC04.php?CID=93\)](#). ❖

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