

Syrian Media and Government on Barak and the Peace Process:

On the Record

Aug 12, 1999



Brief Analysis

Since the election of Ehud Barak as Israeli prime minister, considerable attention has focused on the renewed prospects of an Israeli-Syrian peace. There may be some significant signs that Damascus is preparing the Syrian people for peace and normalization with Israel, but a review of the state-controlled Syrian media presents a more checkered picture. It is worth noting that the Syrian press did not reprint in any form the interview Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad gave to Patrick Seale for the London-based newspaper *al-Hayat*, published on June 23, in which Asad praised Barak as a "strong and honest man" and voiced his belief that there is "a real desire for peace [in Israel]."

Skepticism about Barak's Intentions

"It would be fatally wrong for any of us Arabs to entertain the idea that a change from [former Israeli prime minister Binyamin] Netanyahu to Barak means that everything has changed in Israel and that one should accept as fact the lights, hubbub, and descriptions that are being put together and marketed in order to entrench the misguidance and forgeries. The important point is to change the expansionist, racist, aggressive program, which has always constituted a common denominator for all leaders for the past fifty years." --Editorial by Dr. Turki Saqr in *al-Bath*, May 20, 1999.

"The Lebanon file is growing more complicated and sensitive, particularly since Barak is adding to the Lebanese memory an equally bitter image of occupation brutality. Of course we mean the image of the 'blond woman' we see in newspaper columns, Barak posing as a woman, who sneaked into a small flat on Verdun Street in the Lebanese capital, Beirut, more than 25 years ago to rain innocent children, women and civilians with bullets." --Bassam Hashim in *al-Bath*, May 24, 1999, referring to an April 1973 commando raid led by Barak in which three senior Black September terrorist leaders were assassinated.

"The Barak program, which has revived hopes for peace, is like a minefield; it conceals things that are not apparent on the surface . . . Needless to say, one cannot have any confidence in Israel because throughout the past period, it has been employing the tactics of maneuvering and deception." --Majid Muawwad in *al-Thawrah*, July 9, 1999.

"Although there has been improvement in the Israeli verbal pronouncements on peace, Israeli policy has not changed, for all practical considerations. Practically speaking, Israel is still adopting the same position that opposes the bases and principles of peace." --Majid Muawwad in *al-Thawrah*, July 29, 1999.

"Syria and [the] Arabs are still waiting to see the Israeli political statements transformed into political action. It seems Barak considers peacemaking a public relations job." --Editorial in *al-Thawrah*, August 7, 1999.

Continuing Opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process and Regional Normalization

"The ones who recently convened a normalization conference in a Cairo hotel [attended by participants from Israel,

Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority (PA) on July 6] . . . are only fooling the Arab masses first and foremost. Moreover, the ones calling for normalization are ignoring the history of Torah Zionism, which turned the Almighty God into a real estate broker and a civil affairs officer in the service of the Israeli people whom God chose as an elite people from all mankind while throwing the remainder of humans into the bottom of the human pyramid!" --Dr. Sabir Falhut in al-Thawrah, July 13, 1999.

"[PA chairman Yasir Arafat is] the son of 60,000 whores . . . In his concessions to Israel, Yasir Arafat resembles a striptease dancer who removes more of her clothing whenever she ascends the stage. Look at him when he is on the stage. He moves from concession to concession like the stripper, except that she becomes more beautiful with every layer she removes, while Yasir Arafat becomes uglier . . . [On the issue of Jerusalem, Arafat also] stay[ed] as quiet as a mouse." --Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass as quoted in the Lebanese newspapers al-Safir and Daily Star, August 3, 1999. The Syrian media only covered Tlass's denial of making such comments.

Ambivalence toward the U.S. Role in the Middle East

"A few months ago, President [Bill] Clinton emerged triumphant over the Israeli lobby at the White House and from the intelligence trap that Israel, along with the infamous Monica [Lewinsky], had set for him. A few months ago, President Clinton overcame the evil Israeli blackmail exerted on him and he fought his battle to the end in the Congress . . . Will President Clinton now turn his attention to the region and fulfill his promises and pledges? He has now emerged from the Balkan and Kosovo operation having settled it as he wishes. Will this encourage him to realize the global responsibility of the United States in this part of the world? For Israel is wreaking havoc that is ten times worse than what Milosevic has been accused of." --Editorial in al-Thawrah, June 19, 1999.

"The joint statement on Barak's visit to Washington said that the two parties have decided to upgrade the friendship and cooperation that is existing to a higher level of strategic partnership. This means that the United States and Israel are one party in their relationship with the Middle East and the Arab countries in particular." --al-Bath, July 22, 1999.

"The United States insists on an effective role which would lead the peace process to its goals, while what Israel has announced shows the differences between Washington and Tel Aviv." --al-Bath, August 8, 1999.

Compiled by James Perlin, a research intern at The Washington Institute, from translations in the Associated Press, Reuters, and the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS).

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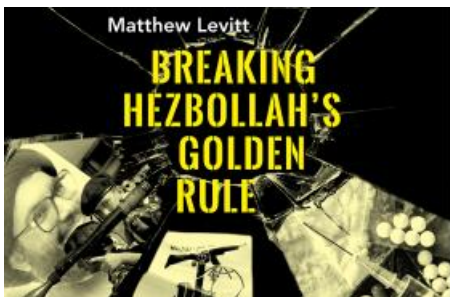
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