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Peace, Peace... but there is no Peace with Syria

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Every few weeks, it seems, the Israeli-Syrian negotiation track is roused from its slumber. In an almost fixed andú one must say, pathetic ritual, the Israeli public is informed of an exchange of signals between the two protagonists, in which one or the other proclaims its serious intention to bring about a renewal of the negotiations, and consequently, of an impending breakthrough. This renewal of negotiations, it is hinted, will miraculously lead to an Israeli-Syrian peace that will be followed by Syria severing itself from the “axis of evil” - Iran, Hizballah and Hamas.

In the most recent instance, public attention was directed towards the Israeli-Syrian track in connection with the mid-November visit to Paris of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Both the Israeli and foreign press reported that Netanyahu passed a message to Syrian President Bashar al-Asad via French President Nicolas Sarkozy. The missive was said to inform Asad that Netanyahu was aware of the price of peace with Syria, hence, in return for a peace agreement, Israel was prepared to withdraw from the Golan Heights. The Prime Minister’s Office in Jerusalem quickly denied these reports. It was even leaked from Jerusalem that Netanyahu’s message to Asad was of a completely different nature, not a promise to retreat from the Golan, but rather a stern warning that Israel would not continue to remain idle if Syria persisted in supplying arms to Hizballah.

Vague and ambiguous messages emanated from Syria as well. In a series of speeches and press interviews, Bashar stated once again his desire for a renewal of the peace process with Israel. He even declared that the Syrian public was ready for peace and wanted it. At the same time, he reiterated the Syrian position that his country would only renew peace talks with Israel on condition that Israel commit itself to a withdrawal to the lines of June 4, 1967. Bashar added that at the present time he saw no Israeli partner for peace talks on the horizon. He warned that the absence of progress in the peace process would push the Arabs to adopting the option of armed resistance (*muqawwama*), thus implying that violent action against Israel by Syria's client organizations might be renewed.

The background to Israel's possible interest in renewing negotiations with Syria is clear. The Palestinian track has reached a dead end and does not seem to have any chance of moving forward in the foreseeable future. Despite this stalemate, Israel, and perhaps the United States as well, seeks to convey a feeling of movement in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. And so, in the absence of any progress with the Palestinians, the Syrian-Israeli track becomes the default option. There are those in Israel and the U.S. who believe that, on the face of it, the problems on the agenda with Syria are much simpler than those connected with the Palestinian issue, and hence, with several rounds of talks, it should be possible to renew the negotiations with Syria, and perhaps even reach a peace agreement with it. As for the Syrians, Bashar seems to believe that by simply making statements, and perhaps even taking steps to renew negotiations, he will be able to improve his position in western Europe and, even more importantly, his relations with the Obama Administration.

However, for all practical purposes, the chance of progress on the Israeli-Syrian negotiations track is virtually nil. Both sides, it seems, may have an interest in raising the question of a renewal of talks and placing it on the international agenda. At the same time, however, neither Bashar al-Asad nor Benjamin Netanyahu has any interest or genuine desire, and certainly no sense of urgency, to advance

Israeli-Syrian negotiations or reach a peace agreement between their two states.

Insofar as Syria is concerned, Bashar al-Asad is indeed prepared to talk about peace with Israel, and it may also be assumed that if his conditions were met, then he would be prepared to sign a peace treaty as well. However, it is clear that Bashar is not willing to make any effort, even the most minimal, in order to advance the peace process. He demands as a condition for beginning any negotiations that Israel commit itself in advance to withdrawing to the lines of June 4, 1967, which would mean the return of the Syrians to the shores of the Sea of Galilee. At the same time, he is not prepared to make any commitment in advance of negotiations that Syria will sever its ties with Iran and Hizballah. Bashar has also made it clear to Israel that the path to peace will not be paved with goodwill gestures, public diplomacy, or concessions by Damascus. Thus, the Syrian president's message is that if Israel wants to sign a peace agreement with Syria, it must reconcile itself to the continuation of the friendship between Teheran and Damascus. At the same time, it may be noted, Syrian spokespersons, although not Bashar himself, hint that if a peace agreement were to be signed with Israel, then this development might bring about a cooling of Syrian-Iranian relations.

Meanwhile, the merchandise Bashar is offering has no takers. Contrary to Syrian expectations, the Obama Administration is not in any hurry to open a dialogue with Damascus, nor is it in any hurry to press for the opening of Israeli-Syrian negotiations with American mediation. Turkey is signaling that it is prepared to continue with the task of mediating between Israel and Syria, but Turkey will have to wait a long time before Israel will again be prepared, if ever, to view it as a trustworthy mediator. As long as Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan continues to attack Israel, it is probably unrealistic to think about any Turkish mediating role. Even France, whose capital both Netanyahu and Asad visited within a day of each other, cannot replace the U.S. as an involved and active mediator capable of putting pressure on the sides in order to advance the talks between them.

Against this background, it is appropriate to raise the question of whether Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, who symbolically planted a tree on the Golan Heights prior to the last elections, has any interest in advancing the peace process with Syria, and whether he is prepared to consider giving up the Golan Heights, similar to the readiness he demonstrated in the summer of 1998, during his first term as prime minister. The answer to these questions would seem to be negative. For Netanyahu, progress on the Syrian track under the present circumstances – that is, on the basis of an Israeli commitment to withdraw from all of the Golan Heights to the shores of the Sea of Galilee, without any serious reciprocation from the Syrians, if any at all – would be political suicide. This is certainly the case insofar as the Likud Party's Knesset faction and the right-wing supporters of the government among the public are concerned. It may safely be assumed that this is not something Netanyahu is looking for.

For his part, Israeli Minister of Defense and Labor Party head Ehud Barak has called for considering a renewal of peace talks with Syria. However, he has surely not forgotten that in March 2000, it was his stubborn insistence on not giving in to the Syrian demand that Israel concede Syria's return to the shores of the Sea of Galilee that put an end to the efforts at that time to reach an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement.

The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations are at an impasse, and are not likely to emerge from their current deep freeze any time soon. The situation calls for strong and courageous leaders in both countries, and especially leaders with vision, like Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin in their time, as well as active American involvement in the process. Without these factors it is hard to believe that negotiations will resume in the foreseeable future or, even if they do, that any breakthrough can be achieved.

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