

## Damascus, Ramallah or Tehran

Contributed by Amir Oren, Haaretz  
Monday, 07 April 2008

In September 1984, when he became defense minister, Yitzhak Rabin summoned the American ambassador, Samuel Lewis, and surprised him with a message for Washington: a request to begin examining secretly to what extent, and under which conditions, Syria was prepared for peace with Israel. Rabin's initiative had no follow-up. The administration of Ronald Reagan and the regime of Hafez Assad were in direct confrontation, the Israel Defense Forces had not yet withdrawn from central Lebanon and Syria was clinging to its "strategic support," the Soviet Union.

This season's tension between Israel and Syria serves to bring home the extent of the missed opportunity of those years, as of subsequent decades, following the American display of prowess in Iraq in 1991 and 2003. It would have been possible to make peace with Syria, to prevent the horrors of war and to save hundreds of fallen in Lebanon. In the 1990s, Rabin tried to promote a dialogue with Assad via the Clinton administration and its weak secretary of state, Warren Christopher. But without James Baker, the dynamic secretary of state under George Bush Sr., the chance of an agreement was lost. Only as a more problematic alternative, and without much satisfaction, did Rabin fall back on the Oslo process.

Hafez Assad sent a division to Saudi Arabia in the framework of the alliance against Saddam Hussein, was impressed by the diplomatic and military policy of Bush Senior, sent representatives to the Madrid Conference and dispatched his then chief of staff, Hikmat Shihabi, to talks with Ehud Barak and Amnon Shahak. Assad's son learned an important lesson from Bush's son - the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq sent Bashar Assad the message that he, too, was not immune to punishment.

That was the background to the contacts between his brother, Maher, and the former director general of the Foreign Ministry, Eytan Bentsur, with the blessings of then foreign minister Silvan Shalom and with the knowledge of the prime minister at the time, Ariel Sharon. But to Shalom's amazement, Sharon insisted on receiving the report about Maher's talks with Bentsur not in private, as Shalom had intended, but in the presence of many advisers. The confidential contact soon became public, whether to torpedo it or to embarrass Shalom in the eyes of the Syrians and the Israelis, or perhaps it was an instance of Sharon's well-known humor: When Shalom proposed to him that the new ambassador to London should be Zvi Hefetz, who actually was appointed and succeeded in the post, Sharon at first suggested another candidate - Chaim Topol.

President George W. Bush indeed blatantly abhors the Syrian regime, but Israel's pointing to this fact as a reason for the deadlock in the channel between Jerusalem and Damascus is a mere excuse. No American administration has ever dared to repudiate diplomatic progress between Israel and the Arabs when this was achieved under its nose and contrary to its plans. The practical result of Bush's enmity is that Damascus is waiting for the next American president. Whether this is John McCain, who supports an Israeli-Syrian agreement and respects the advice of Baker and Brent Scowcroft, former advisers to Bush Sr., who urged him to achieve this; or whether it is Hillary Clinton, who told an Israeli friend that she would prefer an effort in that channel to treading water in the Palestinian channel; or whether it is Barak Obama, who favors conciliation in a pleasant manner and by way of a dialogue between rivals, the year 2009 will be one of renewed efforts at contact.

Precisely for that same reason, it is not worth it for Assad to initiate an attack against Israel. Such a war would aim to achieve a diplomatic agreement whose provisions - peace in return for the Golan Heights - are clear. But so long as Bush is sitting in the White House, a military move by Assad would be an adventurous gamble. Even if the outcome between the countries is a forgone conclusion, on the way there Bush is likely to permit Israel to deal a smashing blow to Syria, to its regime and even to Assad himself.

And so this is a time of not-war and not-peace in the North. A military conflict would be bad for Syria and bad for Israel, which is focused on the nuclear threat posed by Iran. The measuring of the two dangers against each other recalls the wavering in the spring of 1981 between two objectives for the Israel Air Force - the Syrian surface-to-air missiles in Lebanon and the Iraqi nuclear reactor. Then, largely thanks to the recommendation of air force commander David Ivri, preference was given to taking care of the far-off nuclear problem over tackling nearby Syria.

The activity in the talks with senior members of the Palestinian Authority toward reaching a "shelf agreement" is a matter of appearances. The tree has not yet been planted from whose truncated trunk will be built the shelf on which an agreement will be placed that is real, binding and able to be implemented with a serious Palestinian leadership that will be prepared to endanger itself and its weapons and will ban warfare on its enemy-from-home. Items from the shop floor, as we all know, do not have a warranty for an extended period. After the despair from the Palestinians, they will return to the Syrians, even if it is not under Bush.

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/972232.html>