

Comment / On peace with Syria, Israeli leaders only talk the talk

Contributed by Elie Podeh
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Netanyahu: Syria dropping Golan condition for talks

The ritual "track dance" is in full swing: the Syrian track first - no, the Palestinian track first. A future scholar researching the history of the main contacts between Israel, Syria and the Palestinians starting in the 1990s will discover a marvelous cyclical pattern: Whenever the Palestinian track reached a dead end or a breakthrough beckoned, the Israelis began talking about the Syrian track, and vice versa.

What the two tracks have in common is that no breakthrough has really occurred in either. The reasons for this are many and varied, but there is no denying that Israel bears much of the responsibility. The Barak, Sharon and Netanyahu governments seem to have preferred making noises about peace to doing anything about it. The Olmert-Livni government seems to have been the only one that took steps toward reaching an agreement, behind the scenes via Turkey.

Making do with noises about peace has a number of advantages. Psychologically, it gives our leaders, and perhaps some of our citizens, the feeling that Israel really wants peace, while the other side just talks about it. Politically, it doesn't cost anything.

There's nothing new in that the Syrian arena is more amenable. The Syrians are not as internally divided as the Palestinians, there is apparently "someone to talk to" there, and the issues and possibilities for resolving them are familiar. Some of them have already been agreed on. So why has the Syrian track been pushed aside? The answer is to be found in the inability of Israeli prime ministers to make a clear decision about withdrawing from the Golan Heights.

They fear the electoral implications of such a move because of the Golan's special status in Israeli public opinion. Unlike Judea and Samaria, an ideological question is not at issue, and different pretexts are given for not negotiating with Syrian President Bashar Assad: His government bankrolls terror attacks, it's in a strategic alliance with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, all he wants is to dip his toes in the Kinneret, and so on.

Without belittling the importance of these matters, it should be stressed that if Anwar Sadat's positions had been scrutinized like this, there would have been no peace deal with Egypt. His first demands included not only Israeli withdrawal from all Egyptian territory it had conquered, but also a solution to the Palestinian problem. This linkage made the negotiations so difficult that Sadat walked out.

The Egyptian precedent teaches us several things about the Syrian track: First, Israel will not receive any advance concessions that could be used as bargaining chips in negotiations. Even if Syria is not prepared to formally cut its close ties with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, a serious diplomatic move would drive a wedge through this axis, with a significant affect on the regional balance of power. Second, tough initial bargaining positions do not necessarily reflect the final positions. Significantly, the Syrian position, unlike the initial Egyptian one, does not call for a solution to the Palestinian problem.

Israeli politicians mouth lofty slogans about the importance of peace with Syria, but they aren't prepared to face up to the price to be paid. Instead, they pose preconditions. Israel's situation in the Middle East is at rock bottom. Beyond the familiar regional threats, Turkey has moved away and the regimes in Egypt and Jordan have to defend themselves against public opposition to peace with Israel. We need from our decision makers a more active and effective policy, as well as cooperation with moderate elements. The Syrian arena, unlike the Palestinian one, offers an abundance of opportunities for bold and creative leadership, but that has not been forthcoming.

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Netanyahu: Syria dropping Golan condition for talks
By Jonathan Lis and Barak Ravid

Syria is now willing to negotiate without preconditions, having retracted its earlier insistence that talks could not begin unless Israel first agreed to withdraw from the entire Golan Heights, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Monday.

Briefing the committee on the indirect feelers to Syria that he put out several weeks ago via French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Netanyahu said Damascus initially insisted on this precondition.

"But when I met with Sarkozy [last month], he told me the Syrians are ready to waive this precondition but do not want to negotiate directly, only via a mediator," Netanyahu said. "I replied to Sarkozy, 'I prefer direct negotiations, but if the Syrians want mediation, you mediate.'"

Sarkozy, the premier continued, said the Syrians prefer Turkish mediation. But Netanyahu responded that an "honest broker" is needed, and he is "not certain" the Turks fit the bill given their behavior since Israel's war in Gaza nearly a year ago.

Moving on to Lebanon, Netanyahu said that "today Hezbollah is the real Lebanese Army," and the Lebanese government will therefore be held responsible for any Hezbollah attack on Israel.

Meanwhile, Israel is working with the United Nations to try to complete an Israel Defense Forces withdrawal from the northern half of the village of Ghajar before Italian General Claudio Graziano steps down as head of UNIFIL, the UN Interim Force in Lebanon. Graziano is scheduled to leave his post at the end of January.

The Israeli-Lebanese border runs right through Ghajar. Israel occupied the village's northern half during the Second Lebanon War in 2006 and has refused to leave without security arrangements that would prevent Hezbollah from using northern Ghajar as a staging ground for attacks.

Under Graziano's proposal, which Israel has accepted, UNIFIL would have sole responsibility for security in northern Ghajar once the IDF withdraws; no Lebanese Army troops would enter it.

However, Israel would retain responsibility for civilian services such as education and health care in both halves of the village.

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