



The Golan, the International Angles and Syria: Apparently Israel's Interests Do Not Really Count

Christopher Barder¹

Recently, President Assad of Syria made plain his optimism about the return of the Golan to Syrian control. Of course, he needs to sound optimistic as this goal has been a hallmark of Syrian foreign policy since the Syrians were dislodged and removed from the Heights in 1967, after constant shelling and aggression against Israeli farmers, kibbutzim and water sources. Life was made as wretched as possible for those below, with many children regularly confined to sleeping in shelters against the bombardments. But the international community has a short memory and is disinclined to punish Arab aggressors against Israel even if it does so against those who threaten oil supplies.

To a considerable extent, in fact, the role of Syria in the Middle East has virtually nothing to do with the arms-oil equation, which serves to dominate the Gulf. Syria lacks oil, and, as Professor Plaut showed some years ago, it is all but a bankrupt state. If it did not have ties with Iran, Hizbullah and Lebanon, it would scarcely be a power broker at all in the region. Furthermore, these ties bring it to a position of significance in ways which have received little publicity over the years in the politically correct media in the West. It protected important Nazi Alois Brunner, described by Eichmann as his “best man”; it ran a major narcotics industry derived from its holdings in the Beka’a valley. Reuters reported in September 2007 that the poppy crops for heroin and cultivation of cannabis plants were regarded as essential by the farmers, who sought to evade Lebanese government intervention.

All of this is ignored by Western diplomacy, along with “the axis of evil” which still pertains in the region and which has played a crucial role in safeguarding Syrian and Iranian interests at the expense of the Christian factions in Lebanon and the Israeli security interests on its northern border. UNIFIL continues, despite the summer 2006 war, to play a patchy and unreliable role, with constant reports of Hizbullah infiltrating and, indeed, powerful south of the Litani River.

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This then, however sketchy, is a short background to the stance adopted by the EU and the United Kingdom concerning Israel's position on the Golan Heights. This has substantively not altered over the years since at least 1981 but may have gained in confidence with US President Obama's soft touch and friendship attempts with Muslim regimes everywhere. The perception may well be that Israel is under the diplomatic cosh in relation to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and therefore should receive similar pressure in relation to the Golan Heights.

Some serious questions need to be asked. Given Daniel Pipes' sometime dictum that the Golan Heights were the safest place in the Middle East, why would any sane Western country wish to reward Syria, which has continued to harbour terrorists and support terror networks despite Western suffering and regional stability being in jeopardy as a constant. The West loses money and face and yet continues to ignore Syrian human rights and sponsorship of all kinds of evil. A 2008 Council on Foreign Relations report in the USA made the position quite clear but this and other material is routinely ignored by Western states.

By way of just one example, US Middle East envoy George Mitchell told Syrian President Bashar al Assad in Damascus at the end of July 2009 that the US had decided to ease sanctions on spare aircraft parts, information technology products and telecommunications equipment, sales of which had been restricted. While Israel holds the Golan Heights such a rapprochement may not mean quite so much but given access to Iranian, North Korean and Russian and Belorussian armaments markets and credit, Syria has every opportunity of beefing up its threat potential. Recent history has shown its missile and biological and chemical weapons capability to be very considerable indeed. How can "defensible borders" for Israel not mean retention of the Golan?

British Foreign Secretary David Millband, rumoured to be a contender for the Labour Party leadership, has made pronouncements that show just how unimportant Israeli security needs are, despite all the words to the contrary. The question remains, how far Arab interests will ever involve acceptance of Israeli strategic defensibility; how far Islam can accept a *dhimmi* state in the region.

Not only do we need Arab countries to reassure Israelis about Arab commitment to normal, peaceful relations, but we need them to endow the Palestinian leadership with the Arab political support they need to do a deal.

Syria is important to this. That is one reason I met the Syrian Foreign Minister last week. I set out what I see as the profound responsibilities of his country – to curb the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq and arms to Hizbullah as well as to respect the sovereignty of Lebanon. But I also emphasised that a secular Syria had much to gain from playing a full role in an Arab coalition committed to the normalisation of relations with Israel – gains well beyond Syrian interest in settlement of the Golan Heights...²

The proverbial leopard changing its spots seems to characterise this approach: Syria is really a kindly participant which has somehow lapsed from good taste and should be playing a responsible and constructive role of stabilisation for the West.

Making the highest level British visit to Damascus in seven years, Mr Miliband said he believed that his host President Bashar al-Assad could play a 'constructive role' in the region as the two men sought to build on a delicate rapprochement between Syria and the West.

² Address at the Mansion House, Whitehall, Labour Friends of Israel Annual Lunch, November 4, 2008.

Mr Miliband expressed hope that Mr Assad would continue indirect peace talks with Israel, which have been brokered in recent months by Turkey.

“This is a region of great conflict but also of great history,” said Mr Miliband. “It is important that those with power in the region exercise it with great responsibility.” He added that he was confident that Syria can “play a constructive role” in bringing peace to the Middle East region.³

So, instead of Israel having its tight conditions echoed by other countries, another agenda is here being enacted and played out, which leaves Israel isolated and appearing uncooperative in the hunt for peace. It will take much skill and *hasbara* to make a difference. Otherwise the case for retaining the Golan may appear to callous other powers to have gone by default. In truth a treaty with Syria is worthless and unnecessary. The deterrence afforded by retention of the entire Golan, by contrast, is both valuable and crucial, as it neutralises the Syrian threat far more effectively than pieces of paper or temporary regimes. This strategic reality is disregarded by all forked tongue pretence at caring about Israel's security voiced by foreign powers. The sinister big question is why.

³ Tim Butcher, **Daily Telegraph**, November 18, 2008.