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Israel – Syria: A Senseless Peace at an Unbearable Price¹

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Preface

At the beginning of 1996, in the United States and under its sponsorship, a last round of talks was held between Israeli and Syrian representatives on the issue of the Golan Heights. With Ehud Barak's accession to office in mid-1999 it appeared that further talks, and rather decisive ones, were only a matter of time. The talks were indeed resumed in the US, under its auspices, on December 15, 1999. Barak's statements about "the vital need for peace with Syria" that would lead to "the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict...and if he just met privately with Assad in a room, an agreement could be finalized," made such an outcome appear likely. But if indeed accelerated negotiations and an agreement were to materialize, the only possible result could be foretold – Israel's complete relinquishment of the Golan, and even beyond.

Since the end of 1992, when contacts with Syria began under US sponsorship, much experience has accumulated in terms of the content of a possible settlement – namely, peace in quotation marks and at a full price, i.e., relinquishment of the entire Golan accompanied by "security arrangements" that are not worthy of the name. Indeed, there could be little doubt that such a "settlement" would constitute sheer political folly.

Israel's current government and many of its citizens are deeply entrenched in a race for "peace", and do not adequately consider what we have wrought for ourselves in the "peace process" with Egypt, Jordan, and the PLO, and what we further stand to lose. In regard to Syria, a few even dare to ask the crucial question – whether such a peace is needed at all when there is such a terrible price to be paid. An adjacent critical question that is seldom asked is whether genuine peace with Syria is possible at all. These, after all, are the two key questions that must be clarified before one rushes to meet privately with Assad in a room.

¹ This paper has been sponsored by **Susan and William Hess** in memory of the late **Haim Landau**, Former Minister of Transportation, Former Chief of Staff of the Irgun and Warrior on behalf of National Jewish Independence.

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Is Genuine Peace with Syria Possible?

It is difficult to avoid the unpleasant but clear observation that “genuine peace” between Israel and its Arab neighbors is in fact not real, and certainly has not ripened. Since the agreements were signed, enough time and experience have accumulated to make such a statement unequivocally.

The “Peace” the Syrians Will Give Israel

Indeed, if there is no true peace between the Arabs and themselves, how can they sell Israel – the “foreign implant” – a “merchandise” they do not possess? It suffices to recall, just in the region’s contemporary history, what occurred in the two Gulf wars since 1980 (and especially in the attempt to eliminate Kuwait as an independent entity), in the termination of South Yemen, in Syria’s ongoing conquest of Lebanon, in Syrian-Iraqi relations, or in Egypt’s relations with Sudan. Such developments clearly indicate that peace is not a deeply rooted value even among the “Arab brethren” themselves.

No wonder that in regard to Israel, it is clear that there is no sign of real peace. The relations with Egypt are at best those of “nonbelligerency plus” (even the enthusiasts call it no more than “cold peace”), though the price we paid was supposed to be in exchange for full peace and normalization. Furthermore, it is no doubt a conditional peace – conditional on our continuing to give up our assets in all sectors until we shrink to our “natural dimensions”. Although Israel does not make an issue of it, it is well known that Egypt also stands in violation of the peace treaty’s main articles and spirit. In late October 1999 the Egyptian defense minister, Tantawi, reminded us of reality when he briefed his armed forces that “Egypt must also prepare for war against Israel”; no doubt, the large-scale Egyptian military buildup is not aimed at weaklings like Libya or Sudan.

The intelligentsia and professional organizations in Egypt (and in Jordan as well) have emphatically boycotted the peace with Israel, and the authorities do not even bother to do anything about it. Even the better-appreciated peace with Jordan is at most a peace with the ruling circle – which realizes that Israel is vital to the kingdom’s existence – and not with all the other strata of the population. The PLO and the “Palestinian Authority” not only fail to uphold the agreements with Israel, but much worse: they persist in virulent incitement against Israel and everything it stands for, as if they had not undertaken, in recurrent agreements, “real peace” including the ending of incitement.

Hence it is vain to suppose that precisely radical Ba’athist Syria, which is ruled by a despot of the Alawite minority (about 11% of the population), will grant the “Zionist entity” genuine or stable peace. In addition, have we all forgotten Damascus’ long-standing crimes? Let us recall just a few of them:

- The daily shelling from the Golan Heights of the settlements of the Huleh Valley (before 1967).
- The attempt to divert the sources of the Jordan River (before 1967).
- The taking over of Lebanon (in 1976) and failure to withdraw from it despite the Taif agreement of 1989.
- The manipulation and prodding of the Hizbullah to attack IDF soldiers in Lebanon, as well as northern Galilee settlements.
- The intimate alliance with fundamentalist, subversive Iran.
- The Syrian leadership’s deep interest and involvement in terrorism and drug trafficking.
- The Syrian authorities’ involvement in the killing of hundreds of American soldiers and civilians in the Beirut suicide bombings (in 1983 and 1984).
- The annihilation of some 20,000 of the Muslim Brethren in the city of Hama (in 1982).

- The stubborn opposition and machinations by Damascus against the Camp David accords over the course of years.

These are not just trifles from the past, sins that can be overlooked as one turns to the day's agenda. They reflect the nature of the state and the regime. Indeed, from the end of the 1980s, with Syria's participation in the Madrid Conference (October 1991) and even more so after Rabin's accession to office (Summer 1992), but due to lessons from the crushing US victory over Iraq, Assad began to sing slightly differently. He started to express some readiness for political negotiations and a settlement with Israel (although on his terms), and even emitted the word "peace", inducing euphoria. But the more sober Israelis were not carried away, realizing that it is vital to examine the nature of the "peace" or the settlement that Assad is prepared to maintain with us, so as to determine if it at all justifies the heavy price that is involved in ceding the Golan and withdrawing to the June 4, 1967 lines – and more (!).

The statements leaders make over the course of many years must indicate their true and long-standing intentions, and intentions are after all a sought-after commodity in strategic rivalries. Indeed, the statements of Assad and his top aides in regard to peace with Israel well reflect the authentic Syrian positions. Thus, to remove all doubt about the *territorial solution*, the spokeswoman of the Syrian delegation already stated at the very beginning of the negotiations in Washington (in September 1992): "Our land is not for sale or for bargaining." Assad himself, in an interview with the Egyptian newspaper *al-Akhbar* (September 1993), asserted unequivocally: "We propose a peace that is based on justice, i.e., full withdrawal... I will not relinquish a grain of sand, he who relinquishes...is a traitor, peace does not consist of bargaining over our land. That would be surrender."

A month later the newspapers of Damascus wrote that "Syria will not settle for less than the return of all the territories including Jerusalem, even if the conflict continues for 100 years." Thus, it is not only a matter of handing over the entire Golan, but more than that. The condition of full withdrawal from the Golan was reiterated up to the stopping of the talks at the beginning of 1996, and has been resumed even more emphatically since the renewal of negotiations in December 1999.

The *type and nature of the peace* that Assad will offer Israel are also clear, despite the various attempts at obfuscation and whitewashing by Israeli circles. In an interview with *Der Spiegel* in December 1993, Assad said: "We are prepared to enter a state of peace, but it is not logical that we should love Israel. If the state of war ends, there will be contractual peace, but diplomatic ties have no connection to peace. Some Arab states do not have diplomatic relations with us, yet we have relations of brotherhood and peace with it [i.e., referring to Lebanon]."

Subsequently there was some moderation of Syria's stance on the issue of the embassies; still, in terms of what Israel regards as normalization and open ties, the Syrian delegation, in December 1995 in the Washington talks, made it clear that:

In return for full withdrawal Syria is prepared for peace without a "tourist invasion" and with no greater cooperation than there is between Egypt and Israel. There is therefore no logic in developing expectations of preferential peace. The peace must be similar to what we [the Syrians] maintain with other states. The opening of embassies does not mean the opening of the gates of Syria to every Israeli tourist. Even Western tourists are not always warmly welcomed in Damascus.

In addition, as Syrian Foreign Minister a-Shara said in a conversation with the Japanese ambassador in Damascus early in February 1996:

Israel demands to reach impossible relations...we do not have such trade and economy and relations even with Arab states...there is no chance that close and friendly relations will be developed with Israel. We are prepared for full peace and normal relations, but it must be kept in mind that we fought each other for nearly half a century.

In fact, a more important and up-to-date statement is that of Bashar Assad – son and designated heir of the president of Syria. In an interview with the weekly *al-Waset* in August 1999 (i.e., after Barak's accession to office), he said: "Peace need not be based on warm relations. Peace must be complete [in Syrian parlance, complete Israeli withdrawal], we will not agree to partial peace [i.e., partial withdrawal], since that would compromise our rights. We will not agree that our sovereignty be affected or harmed, or our rights diminished."

To this selection of statements two more may be added that well reflect basic Syrian positions. In August 1993 (after the Rabin government had been in office a year), Assad said in an interview with the Lebanese newspaper *al-Saphir*: "Israel is an enemy and will remain an enemy" (he even went on to make anti-Semitic remarks). A month later, in an interview with the Egyptian newspaper *al-Akhbar*, he stated: "When I speak of Palestine I regard it as part of Syria. There is no Palestinian people or entity. There is only Syria, and Palestine is an inseparable part of it." Incidentally, Assad has made similar declarations about Jordan: "We and Jordan are one land. One day (King) Hussein will come to realize that we are one people and his kingdom no more than a passing cloud."

Hence it is clear that any "peace settlement" with Assad over the Golan entails *at least* a full withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 lines and a Syrian-style "peace" – much more cold and barren than what Israel has with Egypt – i.e., extremely limited normalization if any. Despite such expressions as "peace of the brave" or "strategic peace", Syria is not really altering its enmity toward Israel and its radical Ba'athist stances. At most it is a matter of a circumscribed, formal peace, rigid and frozen, stemming from a lack of alternatives together with strategic circumstances that Syria has no control over. That is, a "tactical peace" at best, of meager and provisional value.

Among the Arab and Syrian *peace slogans*, incidentally, there constantly appears the term "just peace" (*salaam aadel*). This slogan is also visible in streets of Damascus. Although seemingly innocuous, behind it lurks the principle that only the Arabs are just and Israel is the unjust side and the oppressor. "Just peace" is an Arab synonym for the returning of what has been "stolen" – the returning of the Arabs' "sacred" lands and of their full rights in every tract that is in Israel's possession, until it withers away. This distorted conceptual perspective does not make room for a real compromise with Israel, certainly not a territorial one that would perpetuate its existence in the region and its "conquests". The fact that for the Arabs "land is honor," hence more important than real peace, indicates the value and nature of the peace that the Arabs and the Syrians are prepared to grant Israel. When "land" and "honor" are more important than peace, the latter's value can only be nil (and it should be kept in mind that the Golan accounts for only half a percent of the territory of Syria).

The *reasons for the tactical change in Syria's positions* toward peace as well, may be found in its statements. In March 1993, a senior Syrian official was quoted in an interview with a Jordanian newspaper: "The political negotiations are the best way to prevent Israel from casting Syria in a negative light as the one that rejects peace, and to prevent Israel from bringing Damascus into a state of siege like Iraq and Libya." That same month, Assad himself was quoted (in a meeting with Druze religious figures) as one who "acknowledges Syria's strategic distress since the collapse of the Soviet Union". Assad made similar statements in September 1993 to an Egyptian journalist. Indeed, members of the Israeli delegation to the talks in Washington (in June 1993) heard this from the Syrians: "We joined the talks mainly because international circumstances compelled us to." In addition, during a visit to Teheran (June 1995) by the Syrian vice-president, the former president of Iran, Rafsanjani, "leaked" at a press conference: "Peace was imposed on Damascus so as to restrain Zionist expansion." The biographer and close associate of Assad, Patrick Seale, said to an Israeli journalist (in December 1995): "Assad entered the process so as to return Israel to the 1967 borders and curtail its influence in the region."

The Issue of Borders (from 1923 to 1967) Does Not Enable Real Peace

On this basis it is clear why Assad and his regime are so insistent on a full withdrawal at least to the June 4, 1967 lines. It is true that on the Egyptian front Israel withdrew from all the territory it held to the international border; on the Syrian front, however, there is a substantial (though not physical) difference between the international border and the June 4, 1967 lines. In Israel itself, even those who are ardent about peace with Syria are at most prepared for a withdrawal to the international border and not entirely to the June 4, 1967 lines. But they are not aware of the pitfalls associated with the international border of 1923, which was determined in agreements between France and Britain. The 1923 border is very different from the borders laid down in the Sykes-Picot (representatives of Britain and France) agreement of 1916, according to which most of the Golan was included in the territory of the Land of Israel. Already before the border agreement of 1923, and certainly according to the Good Neighbor Agreement of 1926 (also between Britain and France), Syrian villagers were granted fishing and water-pumping rights in the Kinneret and even rights to the cultivation of land west of the border. This helped Syria after 1948 to take control of the northeast of the lake and claim that (a) it was a full partner in the waters of the lake, (b) Israel was forbidden to pump from it without Syrian consent, and (c) the lake's northeastern part was closed to Israeli fishermen (so as not to compromise the fishing rights of the Syrian villagers...). In addition, the fixing of the borderline 10 meters east of the waters of the lake due to the fluctuation in water level (i.e., a "shifting border") was worthless and a standing source of friction.

Reliance on the international border is also deleterious because in 1952-1953 Israel and Syria held negotiations on the very division of the demilitarized zones west of the international border – which were designated in the armistice agreement of 1949. Thereby Israel implicitly acknowledged that parts of the demilitarized zones do not belong to it but rather to Syria. Indeed, more than once the Syrians then demanded to move the international border westward. In other words, withdrawal to the international border means an almost exact return to the unfortunate situation before 1967 and to Syrian irredentist claims. The Syrians have also, incidentally, stated their claim to lands of Kibbutz Ein Gev in the framework of the June 4, 1967 lines.

Yet, the Syrians do not even agree to the international border but rather to the June 4, 1967 lines. These lines were the outcome of severe clashes that occurred after 1948, when Damascus blatantly violated the UN Partition Resolution and seized such locales as the Hamat Gader area, Mishmar Hayarden, and areas in the Banias region. In accordance with the armistice agreement the Syrians withdrew, and these areas became demilitarized. Over time, Syria exploited Israel's then-weakness and seized parts of the demilitarized areas, such as Hamat Gader and elsewhere. In 1951 a Syrian outpost killed a patrol of seven Israeli policemen, and subsequently Israel in fact ceded Hamat Gader. The absurdity of all of this is that the Syrians want to gain, by means of the withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 lines, ownership and control of areas within Israel proper, in addition obtaining justification and recognition for their brutal conquests while those of Israel are unjustified.

Israeli withdrawal to the international border as part of a "peace settlement" would therefore have grave implications, no less grave than would withdrawal to the June 1967 lines. Even if there are slight physical advantages to the international border over the June 1967 lines, the former still involves Syria's "splashing in the Kinneret waters" as well as difficult military and other drawbacks, which even those most keenly craving peace do not want. But Assad is not prepared to give in even on the issue of the international border, since he would have a hard time explaining to his army and his people why there was not a complete return to positions that were held on June 4, 1967. Hence it will be difficult for the Israeli people and even the Israeli government to agree to such a peace settlement. Consequently, in terms of the borderlines as well, it emerges that genuine peace with Syria is impossible unless Israel agrees to surrender completely and to accept a peace that is humiliating, in addition to ceding the Kinneret and its water.

Why Is Assad Incapable of Real Peace?

Why is it hard for Assad, in terms of peace, to “pay” Israel for the heavy price of loss of the Golan? First, because he does not understand or does not want to understand the meaning of this price. As far as he is concerned, Israel must return all of the Golan plus all “occupied lands”, and all the rest is a bonus. Second, Assad cannot satisfy Israel’s “impossible demands” (in Faruk a-Shara’s words) and apparently prefers the status quo – as, in fact, he so openly stated in a press conference in Damascus with Mubarak (December 1994). It seems that real peace and full normalization with Israel would indeed endanger his minority Alawite regime and undermine the basis of his rule. In an interview with French television (in July 1998), Assad simply acknowledged that peace is probably dangerous for him: “In regard to peace [we] do not want to do something that is likely to endanger our people and create an internal confrontation.” The renowned Middle East scholar Bernard Lewis is perhaps on the mark in his statement: “Peace will change Assad from a legitimate and accepted Arab leader to an Alawite-minority leader in his own country.”

Assad’s biographer Patrick Seale, for his part, says that “Israel’s demand for economic cooperation deters Assad, since it means, in the first place, exposure to hostile Israeli penetration. This will also give it a hegemonic status, and Assad, like Egypt, sees Israel at best in its natural dimensions. And so – if Israel is prepared for the price tag that he demands and is prepared to accept peace on Assad’s terms – good, and if not – so be it.”

There always looms the fundamental question as to whether real peace is possible at all between a democratic state and a totalitarian regime like Syria’s, which, in addition to everything else, is rotten and corrupt. History teaches that police states and dictatorships are rotten at the core and also ultimately unstable (even though Assad’s regime has been stable for three decades). Hence it would be dangerous, and certainly an act of folly, to be dependent on the will of a minority ruler and regime of this sort. Nor is there any certainty that in the event of a Sunni takeover in Syria (and Assad is neither young nor very healthy), Sunni rulers would uphold obligations made by a hated Alawite ruler.

One can go on and on trying to analyze Assad’s intentions, however, one solid fact remains. Assad is afraid of genuine peace, and apparently does not want it. If that is not so, why did he not exploit the (unfortunate) hints of Rabin, and Peres after him, about their readiness to withdraw from the entire Golan and reduce to a minimum their demands for “security arrangements”; why did he even emphatically refuse to maintain a direct and discreet channel of discussion that could only have been to his advantage in terms of the negotiations’ outcomes and of persuading Israeli public opinion (see the case of Sadat)?

One may attempt to explain this as a mishap stemming from such circumstances as the assassination of Rabin (November 1995), or Peres’ decision (early in 1996) to advance the elections, or the severe terrorist bombings in February-March 1996, in whose wake the talks with Syria were suspended because it did not condemn these terror acts. Incidentally, since Syria to this very day has not condemned terrorism, why is the hour suddenly right for the renewal of negotiations that were halted for precisely that reason?! In any case, the fact that Assad did not eagerly exploit the many opportunities for a settlement in his favor, i.e., certainly not for a real peace, remains in all its starkness.

The emerging conclusion may be disheartening but it is clear as day: genuine peace according to Assad, even at the terrible price of handing over the entire Golan (and much more), is not realistic. An unworthy settlement, far from true peace, may eventually be reached, and only if Israel is prepared to perform a total striptease that endangers its welfare and existence.

Is Peace with Syria at the Price of the Golan Required at All?

If real peace with Syria is not realistic, perhaps some sort of peace is in any case required of Israel? Indeed, Prime Minister Barak and others believe that peace with Syria is vital to Israel, being the “key” to peace and stability in the region.

Here too, however, the devotees of peace are in for a disappointment. To answer this question, several aspects are pertinent:

- Is “peace” with Syria indeed the key to a broader peace that will bring the end of the conflict?
- If Israel does not accept Syria’s conditions for a settlement, does this pose risks of war?
- Syria’s weakness – the economic angle.
- The importance of the Golan in the strategic equation and the cost of losing it.
- The “linkage” between southern Lebanon and a solution on the Golan.

Other points that are relevant to answering the question – such as the existence of substitutes and compensations for loss of the Golan in the form of “security arrangements” and advanced weaponry, as well as the question of Syria’s trustworthiness – will be discussed below.

Is Peace with Syria Indeed the Key to Stability and an End of the Conflict?

Prime Minister Barak and his associates claim that peace with Syria is vital in itself and also carries a tempting dividend – the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Barak also believes that if he can meet privately with Assad in a room, the two of them will emerge with a peace deal. Its content, however, is known in advance: complete return to the June 1967 borders, minimal security arrangements, and cold, barren peace.

But is it true that even a settlement of this type will end the conflict?

Implicit in Barak’s argumentation is that peace with Syria will also bring peace with *Lebanon*, with Saudi Arabia as well, and indeed with all (or most) of the Arab states in the “second circle”. Even though “peace” with Syria would indeed lead the puppet government of Lebanon into a similar settlement, it is highly doubtful that more important *Saudi Arabia* would follow suit with relations of peace and amity with Israel. Saudi Arabia was and is an Islamic state with a fundamentalist and Wahabi heritage. Moreover, because of its essentially unstable royal and tribal structure, it is questionable whether Saudi Arabia would want to endanger itself with such a profound change when this is in no way needed for the Saudi regime. It does not have a common border with Israel and its conflict with the Jewish state is not direct or on a pragmatic basis, but rather ideological. It can therefore remain completely indifferent to a “peace settlement” between Syria and Israel.

And if that is the case with Saudi Arabia – the main Gulf state – then most of the Gulf principalities, with Kuwait at their head, are likely to behave similarly. It is a saddening fact that the establishment of Israeli interest offices in Oman and Qatar did not “take” with the other states, including Kuwait. Furthermore, even if they should follow in the wake of the settlement with Syria, these small states have no great significance for the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel, which was quarantined from a political standpoint and boycotted by all of the Arab states for many years, exaggerates when it perceives the opening of relations with any marginal Arab entity as a “breakthrough”.

Ostracized *Iraq* and its cruel ruler are bolstering their resistance to the West by, among other things, inflaming anti-Israeli sentiment. A closed and dictatorial regime needs an external enemy to get the masses to abide by it. Moreover, Iraq and Syria, and particularly their leaders, are in a state of deep enmity, and Syrian “peace” with Israel would actually provide a rallying cry for the Iraqi regime in the

intra-Arab struggle. It can be argued that the “end of the conflict” can be achieved without present-day Iraq, but lack of peace with this country – which is more important in the Arab camp than all of the Gulf principalities – means that to proclaim the “end of the conflict” is quite premature.

More generally, it does not seem that Barak and others in Israel and the world are aware that many circles (too many) in the Arab states have not at all internalized genuine peace and authentic reconciliation with the “Zionist entity”. The old concepts of *Habib Bourguiba* (tactical and temporary acceptance of Israel only), or such long-standing notions as the “strategy of stages” and the *inkimash* (bringing Israel to collapse from within), are deeply rooted among most of the Arabs. Thus, tactical and provisional “peace settlements” with them cannot alter this legacy. And if that is the case, then the idea of the “end of the conflict” does not have much meaning, since this is a profound conflict that is without parallel in the world.

The same applies to fundamentalist *Iran*, which, as a Muslim state, is umbilically tied to the conflict in the Middle East due to its deep hostility to Israel as well as the long-range missiles and weapons of mass destruction that it is developing. The “liberal” President Khatami has limited power compared to the fanatical ayatollahs. Although Teheran has indeed declared that it would not prevent Syria from reaching “peace” with Israel, one may reasonably assume that it will seek to undermine it. Concurrently, Syria will need its alliance with Iran for a long time to come, and this will negatively affect the “peace” in question with Israel. Iran also wields the Hizbullah organization in Lebanon as an instrument of its subversive and terrorist policy. Syria can indeed restrain this organization, but it will not be eager to clash with it, and will arrive at compromises that are to the detriment of the settlement with Israel. In addition, so long as Iran is not at peace with Israel, Israel’s nonconventional potential must be maintained, and as things are interconnected, this must affect the quality of the “peace” relations with Syria and the Arabs in general.

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When Barak and others speak of peace with Syria as the key to stability, perhaps they mean that because of its political weight and military might, Damascus has the potential to derail political processes between Israel and the Arabs. Yet, though this may have been true in the past, it has not been true for a long time. The fact that *Syria can no longer disrupt political processes* is a most important strategic phenomenon in the region that many have not discerned.

The decline in Syria’s ability to play a “spoiler” role has clearly emerged in two connections – the PLO and Jordan. In the past Jordan could not move toward formal peace with Israel, though a de facto peace prevailed, because of the shadow of Big Brother to the north. The nightmare of Syria’s invasion of Jordan in September 1970 haunted the Jordanian leadership. Yet in October 1994 Jordan signed a formal peace treaty without fear of Damascus. Moreover, the late King Hussein was not afraid to deviate from the hollow Arab formulation that “every inch” of their land is “sacred”, leasing to Israel territories that the latter had transferred to Hashemite sovereignty.

The PLO was even less afraid of Syria when it went ahead and signed (in 1993) the Oslo Declaration of Principles and the subsequent agreements. These marked a drastic deviation from the Arab, and particularly Syrian, line of “joint and comprehensive peace”. Arafat did not fear to repudiate Syrian patronage so as to realize Palestinian interests, notwithstanding the existence of a large Palestinian refugee population in Syria and Lebanon (about 650,000 people altogether), and the existence of about ten Palestinian “rejectionist organizations” under Syrian sponsorship.

Jordan’s and the PLO’s independent steps in the political process clearly indicate the decline of Syria’s power and its inability to derail processes. Moreover, Syria itself, out of strategic weakness, was forced to join the political process, well beyond its participation in the Madrid Conference in October 1991 – i.e., the semi-direct talks its representatives held with Israel in 1992. Thus the Syrians do not have much leverage over Jordan, the PLO, or others.

Yet Syria holds allegedly some cards in the strategic struggle: terrorism, Iran, and Lebanon. But a closer look shows that even these cards are weak. It is more than a decade since Syria had to cease its direct support for terrorist activities. It also does not “feel comfortable” about the fact that the United States continues to publicize it each year in the *Annual List of International Terrorism*, based on its providing of shelter and sponsorship to Palestinian and other terrorist organizations. Interestingly, in 1998, Damascus was forced to comply with a Turkish ultimatum and expel the Kurdish leader Ojalan from its territory, as well as eliminating the bases of his organization (the PKK, which perpetrates terror against Turkey). At the same time, this does not detract from Syria’s indirect but constant aid for terrorism and the drug trade. For example, Damascus hosted a conference of terrorist organizations as recently as the end of 1998.

Damascus has a quite close alliance with Iran. This alliance stems from strategic need, since Syria is surrounded by strong enemies such as Iraq and Turkey, not to mention Israel. But heavy reliance on Iran as an ally also means association with a leper-state, and Assad is certainly aware of this. Nor is Syria’s control of Lebanon completely assured, since Iran wields the Hizbullah, which can cause certain headaches even to Syria.

It seems true that Syria holds a weightier card in southern Lebanon through the Hizbullah, which it uses to attack IDF soldiers and border settlements. But this ability stems more from Israeli weakness, mainly in regard to the unwillingness to use force, than from Syrian strength. If Israel would use adequate force and show Lebanon the cosponsor and Syria the patron of Hizbullah that the path of terrorism and guerrilla warfare is not to their advantage, Damascus would long ago have been exposed in its nakedness. Most unfortunately, this was not Israel’s ongoing inclination. Yet one should not conclude from this that Lebanon is for Syria a strong card against Israel, and hence “peace” is vital – this notion is completely mistaken and untenable.

Thus, the prattle about “Syria as the key to peace and regional stability” does not accord with reality. Moreover, the Arab-Israeli conflict today is in an even worse shape than in the past, notwithstanding the “peace agreements”. Israel’s far-reaching concessions have not moderated whatsoever the deep-rooted hostility toward it.

Risks of War: The Lack of an Option

One of the arguments used by the adherents of peace with Syria is the danger of war, which will materialize if Israel does not bring Damascus into the circle of peace quickly and no matter at what price. The brandishing of the whip of war is usually accompanied by a demagogic argument – “We must make every effort for peace so as not to endanger our children and to prevent bloodshed.” Yet Syria, for a very long time, has had no real war option. Why is this so?

First and foremost, Syria has lost all of its wars with Israel, and not without good reason. In 1967 most of its air force was destroyed at one stroke, and it had to order its army to evacuate the Golan as well. In 1973, despite the fact that Syria surprised Israel and deeply penetrated the Golan, the war ended at a distance of 40 kilometers from Damascus, with 1,100-1,200 of its tanks (out of 1,400) destroyed. In the Peace for Galilee War in 1982, the Israeli air force downed more than eighty Syrian aircraft with no losses on its side. Moreover, the Syrian surface-to-air missile deployment that was built in the Lebanese Bekaa so as to neutralize the Israeli air force (in the wake of the success of these missiles in the Yom Kippur War, 1973) was also destroyed rather easily. On the ground, the Syrian forces were eventually forced to evacuate Beirut, and the supremacy of both the Israeli air force and ground forces emerged clearly.

Second, the last Gulf War (1991) demonstrated the military and technological supremacy of the West. The Syrians witnessed at close range the collapse of the Iraqi army, which is similar to their army in

terms of weaponry and quality. They are aware that Israel, a pioneer of high-grade military technology, possesses such and additional sophisticated weaponry, and this does not encourage them to venture a catastrophic war.

Third, the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s left Damascus without a superpower patron, which is most important for a state like Syria, and certainly in time of war. Gorbachev made clear to Assad already in 1987 that he should not count on a military option. Assad could also have learned from the precedent of the Iranian defeat in the war with Iraq (1980-1988) what happens when a belligerent state fights without a patron, which it needs both for political backing and as a source of the constant supply of weaponry. Not only did Syria's superpower patron collapse but the world became unipolar, and it is the United States, the friend of Israel, that is dominant. Thus the international atmosphere is not conducive to Syria's launching of a substantial war.

Fourth, the collapse of Iraq, its isolation and the sanctions against it on the one hand, and the agreements between Israel and Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinians on the other, have left Syria in a situation where it cannot depend on an Arab coalition to join forces with it in case of war. The fear of a war with Israel in which Syria would stand alone haunts Assad and led him to try remedying this situation through "strategic parity", which did not exactly succeed. Syria is in fact not a weakling in military terms, but it is aware that if it goes to war by itself it will surely come out on the losing side. Recently another serious problem emerged for Syria with the strategic cooperation between Israel and Turkey, i.e., outflanking it from two sides.

Fifth, the actual state of the Syrian army seems quite murky. In addition, it appears that most of its weaponry is in need of rehabilitation and renewal. According to a report of the US Congress, Syria's procurement over eight years (1991-1998) came to only \$1.3 billion (compared to \$9.9 billion for Egypt and \$5.6 billion for Israel). Notwithstanding, Syria tries hard to remedy the situation and recently made some weapons purchases in Russia.

Similarly, the data on the Syrian defense budget also indicate that it has been shrinking significantly. According to a report of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), as a proportion of GDP the Syrian defense budget fell from 14.5% in 1989 and 1990 to 7.7% in 1995. The defense budget in absolute terms is also quite small (some \$1-2 billion per year) compared to the Israeli defense budget, which comes to \$8.4 billion. These data cannot suggest intentions or capacity to launch a comprehensive war, and indicate that Syria's military strength is primarily defensive rather than offensive. Even the arsenal of surface-to-surface missiles (including the nonconventional warheads) is more designed to balance Israel's military supremacy than to rush into an adventure of war. Moreover, Syria's ramshackle economy does not permit Assad to take dangerous military measures.

Sixth, for years apprehensions have been expressed lest Syria carry out a quick military grab on the Golan Heights, after which superpower intervention would leave its gain in its hands. Yet the likelihood of such a military initiative is low, since today there is no superpower to prevent Israel from extending the fighting and defeating the Syrian army. Moreover, Israel does not have to play Syria's "small war" game, since it can change it to a "big war" posing serious dangers to Damascus itself and its regime. One should also recall that Syria and the Arabs have not launched a war against Israel for twenty-seven years (since 1973). Above all, every expert worthy of the name knows that the Golan does not hold the highest place in Syria's order of national priorities, and will not impel it to go to war.

In recent years much experience has accumulated in regard to military tensions and fears of war being launched by Syria, fears that have proved groundless. Thus, in the summer of 1996 and subsequently in 1997, when apprehensions of war from Syria mounted, the Syrian army's movements proved to be strictly defensive. All this should give Israel respite from the trauma of 1973. Likewise, the fear that the Palestinians in their clashes with Israel will pull the Arab states, and mainly Syria, into war is

baseless. It does not appear that any Arab state, and certainly not Damascus whose relations with the PLO and Arafat are dismal, will go to war for their sake.

Hence there is great doubt as to whether Syria has, currently and in the foreseeable future, a significant military option against Israel, or a whip to prod Israel into making peace on Syrian terms. This was well expressed by Defense Minister Moshe Arens at the end of his tenure in July 1999: “There is no reason to be afraid of Syria and one does not have to give in to its dictates regarding the Golan.” Overall, if Israel continues to shudder at the thought of war as if it had been defeated in all of its wars and is not ready to fight for its true interests, in the end it will face both war and humiliation.

Syrian Weakness: The Economic Angle

Having discussed Syria’s lack of a war option, one should also take a glance at its decrepit economy. Although the economic aspect need not be dominant in considerations of peace and war, it is different in the Syrian-Israeli context.

All who are familiar with Syria’s economy describe its ramshackle, abject condition and infrastructure – the heritage of Ba’athist centralized socialism. The Syrians themselves acknowledge this state of affairs (*al-Thawra*, March 1999). Indeed, since the economic centralization in the hands of the ruling circles is not just harmful in itself but fosters corruption that is difficult to remedy, the economic weaknesses are structural. To Syria’s good fortune it had until recently three main sources of revenue to sustain it – but even these have ceased or declined drastically.

Since 1995, oil production has seen a steep decline. In 1998 oil revenues amounted to \$1.7 billion, compared to \$2.5 billion in previous years. Oil revenues comprise about 60% of all Syrian income. The dependency on this source is therefore critical, and is contingent on fluctuations in oil prices and on the discovery of new fields. The second source of income – the transfer of monies from Syrian workers in the Gulf – has also declined from \$700 million to \$490 million. This reflects reduced employment of foreign workers in the principalities and the transfer of monies to places outside of Syria (because of disadvantageous exchange rates). The third source of income, namely, economic aid from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf principalities, has almost completely dissolved since the second Gulf War. Thus, in 1981 Syria received \$1.8 billion in aid; in 1989, only \$100 million. Indeed, after the Gulf War the Syrians received \$2.5-\$5 billion, but this assistance, too, soon came to a halt.

Because of limited space it is worth pointing to only one further indicator of Syria’s economic deterioration – the poor gross domestic product. In recent years the GDP amounted to \$10-\$15 billion per year, compared to \$100 billion a year in Israel. Likewise, Syrian per capita income came to less than \$1,000 (\$17,000 in Israel).

The state of the Syrian economy bears a number of implications:

- a. It is difficult for Syria to strengthen itself militarily.
- b. A danger of instability must constantly hover over the regime, since it has trouble providing employment to a population that grows at an annual rate of 3.3%.
- c. Syria will not become a channel for substantial commercial and economic relations with Israel. On the contrary, the Syrian leadership and business community are apprehensive of commercial ties with Israel.

Even this brief overview of Syria’s economic ailments indicates that it is a fundamentally weak state, and that Israel should not accede to its draconian claims in regard to the Golan.

The Golan's Importance for Israel

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the Golan Heights for Israel from both military and strategic standpoints.

Let us look first at the topographical features. The Golan is a small territory of 1,100 square kilometers (55 kilometers in length and 20 kilometers in width), but its terrain features are dominant. Thus it rises with an escarpment of 500 meters above the settlements of the Huleh and Lake Kinneret. The Hermon is 2.2 kilometers high, and the hills to the east of the Golan – Ram, Varda, Avital, and Peres – rise to 900-1,200 meters. This ridgeline in the eastern Golan constitutes the watershed (i.e., highest ground) that affords control with elevated fire positions both eastward – to the Syrian territory, and westward – to the Israeli territory. The Golan amounts to only 0.5% of the total area of Syria, which comes to some 190,000 square kilometers.

On the northern Golan are the sources of the Jordan River. Of the three sources, only the Dan River (the two others are the Banias and the Hatzbani) was within Israel's territory before 1967. There are 33 settlements on the Heights – including two urban centers – with a total population of 17,000. Also on the Heights are industrial plants that have economic importance.

From a military standpoint, four matters should be noted. First, the Golan is a “defensible” territory in the full sense of the term. Israel has no other defensive asset more important than the Golan Heights. The physical advantages, including the barriers and obstacles (the antitank trenches, ramps, etc.), enable optimal defense even for a relatively small force. This was proved in 1973, when only 175 Israeli tanks defended the Heights against the thrust of over 1,000 Syrian tanks until the IDF reserve forces arrived. Since that time the situation has improved. We should bear in mind that in terms of the ability to withstand a surprise offensive, the issue of topography and terrain in relation to the ratio of the (small) regular Israeli forces vs. the (large) Syrian regular forces is critical.

Second, a Syrian surprise offensive is a potential threat, if only due to its regular army's great advantage in size: of the twelve divisions plus in the Syrian order of battle, seven are deployed in the Golan-Damascus zone, against which stands one Israeli division alone. At the same time, the fact that the bulk of Syria's forces is deployed in proximity to the Golan (in the area of Katana-Kisve, at a distance of 25-50 kilometers at most) allows it to make a surprise offensive move quickly. Thus, the terrain has special importance in terms of the IDF's poor force ratios.

Third, any analysis worthy of the name will indicate that the Hermon and the eastern ridgeline are the best sites for obtaining warning information about Syrian force movements, both by surveillance and electronic means. The uninterrupted line of sight and long-range observation that these sites afford is a huge advantage. All of the substitutes, such as observation posts and electronic devices in the Galilee, or surveillance/listening aircraft and balloons, are deficient because of weather instability, technical glitches, high cost, and inherently limited ability to “deliver the goods”. Nor would it be possible to rely on information from American sources positioned at a warning station on the Golan, both for political and professional reasons.

Fourth, should Israel withdraw from all of the Heights and subsequently need to reconquer them, it will be extremely hard and certainly entail very heavy losses because of the difficulties of executing an attack from low terrain to high escarpment (500 meters high). Although in 1967 the IDF benefited from the Syrian high echelon's panicked order to withdraw, even then the conquest nevertheless involved quite heavy losses.

But the immense importance of the Golan Heights is even more conspicuous in the *strategic domain*. The ultimate purpose of a state, beyond ensuring its sovereign existence, is to live in maximal stability, let alone when real peace is not attainable. In such a situation, stability and strategic balance are certainly preferable to any peace.

And between Syria and Israel since 1974, an optimal situation of strategic balance and stability has prevailed. The decisive reason for this is the presence and deployment of the IDF at a distance of 50-60 kilometers from the capital – Damascus. Other reasons were mentioned above in the context of the low risks of war: the IDF's superiority, the Iraqi army's debacle in the Gulf War, an international climate that is not conducive to war, and so on. But there seems to be a further reason: because of the potentially grievous consequences of war that advanced weaponry poses, a state that conducts a war on its own vital territory is likely to be hit hard. Thus a more "reasonable" battlefield between Syria and Israel, for example, would be the territory of Lebanon, and less so the territory (the Golan) that is too close to the heart of the Syrian regime. Therefore, the quiet that has prevailed on the Golan border for 26 years (since 1974), even greater than along the "peace borders" with Egypt and Jordan, is no accident. The situation on the Golan is indeed one of de facto nonbelligerency with Syria. Israel's strategic balance with Syria, which stems from the IDF's proximity to Damascus and so on, deters war and dictates quiet.

Overall, withdrawal from the Golan Heights would seriously harm Israel's deterrent capacity. Conversely, the Israeli potential threat to Damascus with its more than three million residents (even with artillery!) constitutes a significant deterrent even against Syrian launching of surface-to-surface missiles at the Israeli interior. Most unfortunately, the SSM threat to the Israeli home front acts as a critical factor in Israel's "peace calculations" (thus, for example, Rabin "explained" the upheaval in his thinking about the importance of the Golan before the 1992 elections, and after them). If – exactly the opposite – Israel wants a safety valve against the Syrian SSM threat to its population centers, it must, in fact, remain on the Golan.

A further critical aspect is the question of the heavy price entailed in losing the Golan, be it in the physical or the ideological domain. First of all, one must assume that a "peace treaty" with Syria will bring with it the rehabilitation and renewal of the Syrian army in general, and with advanced Western weaponry in particular. If military strengthening is difficult for Syria at present because of economic hardships, this will be remedied by an agreement that is certain to include US financial assistance (as Egypt and even Jordan have received), which will be channeled for other things than military purposes. This will occur exactly as has occurred with Egypt. In Israel today, there are lamentations and question marks over the "intensive Egyptian military buildup with US weaponry". Moreover, "peace" may also result in reduction of the US compensatory aid for loss of the Golan, on the pretext that this would just goad Syria (and others) into a parallel buildup and start an undesirable regional arms race. Thus Israel will be left with very little on all sides.

Concurrently, Damascus will probably present demands that extend beyond the contents of its peace agreement with Israel. It will demand, for example (it has already voiced it!), that Israel relinquish its nuclear weaponry, and such a demand will carry greater weight than the ongoing Egyptian one in this regard. Since, after all, the signing of "peace" with Syria will bring the "end of the conflict", and, in fact, all of the Arab states at least in the "first circle" will have "peace treaties" with Israel, then "why should it have nuclear weaponry?" Israel can consider itself "consoled" if Damascus settles for demanding (it already has!) only that the United States "reduce the ongoing supply of weaponry to Israel".

In addition, the abandoning of the Golan means loss of control over the precious sources of the Jordan River. More than one-third of Israel's water (550 million cubic meters) comes from these sources and from the streams flowing down from the Golan; as mentioned, before 1967 two of these three main water sources were under Syrian control. Furthermore, in 1964 Syria attempted to divert them through a canal into its own area, and only with drastic military measures did Israel succeed to abort this. To give up control of water sources that are a source of life, and moreover in a hot, arid country like Israel, is crime and idiocy combined. Damascus has even had the audacity to hint that it will be prepared to sell water to Israel (as Egypt sells it oil). Whoever contemplates relying on Syria in this

matter should also not forget the Syrian treatment of Jordan in regard to the Muheibe Dam and the waters of the Yarmouk River. In Israel, the “peace addicts” even prattle about bringing water from Turkey in a pipe through Syria (!) or in tanker vessels, as if water were a marginal import commodity.

Moreover, relinquishing the Golan to the Syrians means uprooting thirty-three flourishing settlements and their seventeen thousand residents who have struck roots there for more than thirty years. Settlement on the land and cultivation of the wilderness (and that is what the Golan was before 1967) were always supreme Zionist objectives. The uprooting and transfer would not only constitute a severe personal and national trauma, but also a mark of Cain on the forehead of Zionism. Some amuse themselves with the perverse notion of the settlements and their residents remaining under Syrian control and sovereignty. Not that the Syrians would agree to this, with the Egyptian model (evacuation of the entire Sinai) before them. But even if the Syrians were to agree, to leave Israeli settlements under Damascus’ sovereignty on the Golan (or anywhere for that matter) means creating a new exile at the doorstep of our homeland. The very exile that Zionism strove hard to eliminate will rise anew at our doorstep, wrought with our own hands. Nor, in ideological terms, does the Golan present any problem of “rule over a foreign people” (if this bothers naive Israelis).

The uprooting and evacuation of the citizens and the army from the Golan Heights also entails a huge practical price. From a study that was done on the evacuation of the Sinai in the early 1980s, it emerges that the cost of the military and civilian evacuation of the Golan may well reach the \$30 billion price tag and even more. This sum, which amounts to one-third of Israel’s annual GDP, is one that Israel probably cannot meet by itself. Indeed, in the summer of 1999 and subsequently, Ehud Barak spoke of the “need for massive US support” (the sum, for starters, moves in the area of \$17 billion for security purposes alone). The administration may be prepared to promise this in the name of the peace Moloch that it worships, but Israel will be making a terrible mistake if it again and again loads itself with funding from the US public. Congress, the only true friend Israel has left in Washington, certainly will not like it and may even refuse to be a milk-cow. The United States will, in addition, have to fund many Syrian needs – military rehabilitation, civilian aid, refugee rehabilitation, and so on, and also provide aid to Lebanon. Even the American “pie” is, in fact, limited, and this must come at Israel’s expense. In any case, in the long run Israel’s increased dependency on the United States will put it in a beggarly, perpetually needy position and greatly reduce its value as a strategic asset. Ultimately the increased dependency will seriously damage the special relations between the two states, as peace with Syria puts Israel on the US dole. We should recall that the limited Wye agreement “cost” the United States \$1.9 billion (\$1.2 billion for Israel, \$400 million for the Palestinians, and \$300 million for Jordan), and that Israel’s expenses in this framework are nothing compared to what they will be in regard to the Golan.

When Israeli chiefs of staff have had to address the question of the value of the Golan Heights, their answer has been that it is important even in “time of peace”. When Barak was chief of staff, he stated unequivocally (March 8, 1995): “My professional opinion as a soldier is that our presence on the Golan is necessary even in a time of peace with Syria.” He thus, in fact, repeated what he had said previously on August 21, 1994. His successor, Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, was quoted early in 1996 as follows: “The Golan has an importance for which no sophisticated weapon or electronic device can substitute should Israel go to war.” He added: “If at the end of the process there is any risk of war, the Golan has an extraordinary strategic importance.”

Undoubtedly even these statements are somewhat evasive, since they reflect the inner tension between the professional opinions of these two and their desire to conform with the political stance of the leaders under whom they served. Even the differentiation between time of peace and time of war sounds contrived in this context, since it could also be applied to the Negev, the Galilee, and any place in Israel. Moreover, Shahak is concerned lest “at the end of the process there is any risk of war,” and no one can say that such a risk would not exist. The character of the radical Syrian regime – and one

may reasonably assume that it will maintain this character in the future – with its continuous striving for military strength, will pose a potential threat to Israel for many years to come. Hence it is difficult to distinguish between “times of peace” and “times of war”.

Those who advocate (and there were such in the present ruling circles in Israel) retaining part of the Golan, such as the cliff ridge on its western section, are basically saying that they fear a Syrian launching of war for many years to come. Thus to exchange the “de facto peace” that has prevailed for years on the Golan for an ostensible “de jure peace”, which will divest Israel of its vital assets with their tremendous advantages, is the embodiment of folly.

The Unfortunate Linkage between the Golan and Southern Lebanon³

“Peace with Syria is crucial because it will bring the tragedy in southern Lebanon to an end,” say Barak and others. It is interesting to note that while he was chief of staff, Barak did not regard Israel’s presence in southern Lebanon as a “tragedy”, and even launched Operation Accountability. In fact the linkage between the two arenas has arisen only in recent years, as the Hizbullah, with Syrian and Iranian instigation, has succeeded in killing more and more Israelis while Israel has displayed, toward this and toward Katyushas on the northern Galilee, a dismaying political and military helplessness.

Thus the pathetic question suddenly popped up – what are we doing there at all? And from there it was a short way to the corrosive and vociferous protest groups. Immediately, an instant “remedy” was found: surrendering to Syria on the Golan Heights would salvage us in southern Lebanon as well. It is worth recalling that not long ago, i.e., in the years of the intifada, most Israeli soldiers preferred “fighting against combatants in Lebanon than *vis-à-vis* children”. Moreover, this remedy suffers from at least two grave fallacies.

First of all, what has one to do with the other? Why pay in the Lebanese currency for the Golan Heights or vice versa, and when we have compromised with the Syrian presence and control in Lebanon? Not only have the Syrians brutally imposed their domination and turned Lebanon into a puppet state, but worse – we have given legitimization to this conquest and are even prepared to pay for it by handing over the entire Golan plus. This unfortunate linkage, which we, in our folly, have created, has enabled the Syrians to exert harsh pressure on Israel with the Hizbullah.

Second, we have already demonstrated in the past that we fold in the face of any determined, sustained struggle. We have not done what is necessary to win the struggle against the Hizbullah. We prattle a lot about the “difficulty of fighting against guerrillas” and so on, but do not take the appropriate measures to win. Since we have not exercised the requisite force, and in the right direction, our capacity to deter and prevail in Lebanon, and indeed in all sectors, has dissipated. Why should we gird ourselves with power and might if these neither deter nor are used appropriately? Israel has maneuvered itself into an unfortunate situation that accords with the general, dejected mood of unwillingness and lack of resolve to employ force as required, preferring to appease any enemy instead.

There are certain measures in Lebanon that would have given Israel the upper hand – for example, by adopting a strategy of the “indirect approach”, that is, eschewing a direct struggle against the Hizbullah that is inherently difficult since it is a small and elusive force, and instead hitting the real vulnerable targets: the Shi`ite population, the Lebanese infrastructure, and the Syrian strongholds and interests in Lebanon (Operation Accountability and Grapes of Wrath did not fail inherently but rather because of flaws in their execution). Striking these targets would have demonstrated to Damascus that

³ This paper was written before the withdrawal of IDF forces from Lebanon, but is no less relevant in the current situation.

Israel will not tolerate a continuation of the bloodletting or the threat of Katyushas, and that it is up to Syria, as the party exercising full control in Lebanon, to restrain the Hizbullah.

There was no reason whatsoever that Israel should pay with the Golan Heights for quiet in southern Lebanon. The Syrian interests in Lebanon are both varied and extremely important, and harming them would give us the upper hand in the political-strategic context as well. Syria regards Lebanon as part of "Greater Syria" (as well as the Land of Israel and also Jordan; thus it stretches from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Akaba); no wonder Syria has no embassy in Beirut. Lebanon is militarily important to Syria because it prevents the outflanking of the latter from the Lebanese Bekaa. There are also about a million Syrian workers in Lebanon (constituting 10%-20% of the Syrian workforce), whose salaries infuse the decrepit Syrian economy with a few billion dollars per year. In addition, the revenues from the drug trade, in which no less than army officers and senior officials of Syria's ruling elite take part, are estimated at around \$5 billion per year.

To stabilize the situation in Lebanon at the time, Syria disarmed all of the militias except the Hizbullah. Syria, moreover, permits the transfer of Iranian weaponry to this organization through its territory. It has been demonstrated more than once that when Syria wants temporary quiet in southern Lebanon, the Hizbullah freezes its activity.

With its entry into Lebanon in 1976, Syria realized an old national aspiration. In October 1989, the Taif agreement stipulated that Syria would withdraw its forces from Lebanon by 1992; but Syria did not do so, and in late 1990 actually exploited the Gulf crisis to strengthen its grip there. In May 1991, Damascus forced the Lebanese puppet government to join it in signing the "Fraternity and Cooperation" agreement which perpetuates Syria's presence in Lebanon. In previous negotiations with Israel, the Syrians indeed asserted that they did not want it to raise the subject of Syria's presence in Lebanon, and should in fact agree to it.

Not only has Israel not exploited Syria's weak spots in Lebanon, but it has allowed it to make Israel's own presence in southern Lebanon a bargaining chip for an even more crucial matter – the Golan. The linkage between these two arenas must be severed. Southern Lebanon is required as a defensive front for northern Israel, at least as long as Lebanon remains a puppet, terror, and guerrilla state. If there is a war there, Israel must and can win it. The Israeli presence in southern Lebanon must not serve as a Syrian bargaining chip on the Golan issue.

Parameters of a Desirable Solution (for Israel) Concerning the Golan

Although it appears that true peace with Syria is neither realistic nor so vital for Israel, certainly not at the intolerable price of the Golan, it is still worth indicating what would constitute a desirable solution for Israel. First, however, it is necessary to discuss, even briefly, a few aspects that affect the choice of a desirable solution.

Are There Substitutes for Israel's Maintaining the Golan?

A quite central question is whether there are substitutes for Israel's possession of the Golan. In this context, "*security arrangements*" hold the first place. But in regard to these, too, it appears that Israeli representatives have already expressed in previous negotiations with the Syrians a readiness for far-reaching concessions, to the extent that these have ceased to be worthy of the name. Common sense would suggest that if Israel is prepared to go so far as to hand over the entire Golan, it should obtain in return security arrangements that at least would constitute a full and satisfactory guarantee against Syria returning to belligerency, and specifically thwarting a Syrian surprise offensive and rapid conquest of the Golan. To ensure that this would be so, Syria should have had to: (a) reduce its

enormous regular army by half; (b) change its structure from offensive to defensive, and from conscript to reserve; (c) deploy its forces north of the Damascus area, thus carrying out a deep demilitarization.

Instead, however, Israel soon accepted the Syrian position that these are “draconian” and “humiliating”, indeed “impossible”, demands. In the Memorandum of Understanding that was reached in the United States in May 1995 (after the meeting between the Israeli and Syrian chiefs of staff), it was agreed that security arrangements would be established according to “the principles of reciprocity and equality”. In other words, the demilitarization and reduction of forces in Syria would be matched identically on the Israeli side; as Assad put it to an Egyptian journalist: “If security arrangements, then be it exactly the same on both sides.”

The Syrians also did not want to hear about the (fundamentally perverse) Israeli idea that they would receive a warning station in the Galilee in exchange for one on the Golan. If anything, they were perhaps prepared to temporarily accept an American-manned warning station on the Golan. They envisaged the Americans also supervising the security arrangements with electronic and aerial means.

Indeed, the security arrangements in the above-mentioned Memorandum of Understanding – which then-US Secretary of State Warren Christopher, in a letter to Netanyahu in September 1996, designated a “nonpaper” – are worthless. It is also extremely doubtful whether more extensive security arrangements (as mentioned above) would have been effective, since in fact the real “security arrangements” consist of the IDF’s presence on the Golan.

As to why “security arrangements” seem valid in the Egyptian arena, the answer is easy. The vast Sinai Desert (over 220 kilometers wide) separates Israel and the Egyptian concentrations on the Suez Canal and constitutes the real pillar of security, as opposed to any formal “arrangement”. Likewise, the IDF can return to the Sinai relatively easily should the Egyptian army enter it. Even if, in the worst case, Egypt’s army should reach Israel’s international border, this still would not spell intolerable danger, especially since it could easily be halted in the exposed desert whether from the air or with a land maneuver. None of these factors exist on the Golan.

To persuade the Israelis to concede the entire Golan, while at the same time “guaranteeing their security”, Rabin initially suggested that a *substantial US contingent* be used to separate Syria and Israel and that a thousand American “observers” be stationed on the Golan (“as a tripwire”). In response to the criticism that this would endanger American lives, he asserted that US soldiers had been stationed in the Sinai since the peace treaty and no evil had befallen them.

Again, though, the comparison with the Sinai is invalid. It is not the American battalion that guarantees security there, but rather the vast and barren desert itself. Furthermore, the Americans are not engaging in an activity that endangers them there, in contrast to the Golan where they would have to constitute a real buffer. Whereas the Sinai Desert is empty of inhabitants, the Golan has a population that will grow and will be close to Lebanon with its excitable Shi`ite population, and to the Hizbullah, which is subject to Iranian influence. In the Sinai, the Americans are not deployed on potential battle routes but rather only in the periphery (the Sharm e-Sheikh area), so that they would not be the first to be hit in an outbreak of hostilities. It should also be noted that the Egyptians have more than once raised the demand that the multinational force be removed from their soil (since it “compromises their sovereignty”). The removal of such a force from the Sinai would not endanger Israel, but from the Golan?

The risk that American soldiers/observers would be attacked on the Golan in the security context is incomparably greater than in the Sinai. If so, the blame would be directed at Israel for wanting them there in the first place. Even if some of them were killed in a routine accident, the blame would be charged to Israel’s account. We seem to have learned little from the stationing of the US marines in Lebanon in 1982-1983, which resulted in severe frictions between them and IDF soldiers and a

political estrangement from the US leadership (at its head – Caspar Weinberger, the defense secretary). It was Israel's good fortune that it then had a true friend in the White House, President Reagan. The positioning of Americans between us and our enemies and even adversaries in a "peacekeeping force" would inevitably erode the special US-Israeli relations while leading to a substantial improvement in the United States' relations with the Arabs, including Syria.

Shimon Peres fell into such a trap when he acknowledged (in the United States early in 1996): "After an agreement, American soldiers will be needed on the Golan in case a Syrian regime today or tomorrow should revert to the old [i.e., violent] way of resolving conflicts." Why, then, should Israel increase its dependency on the United States, which is oppressive in any case, and without even considering the nature of the intelligence that the Americans would provide from the Golan warning stations that they would operate?

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In the context of substitutes for the Golan, the possibility has also been raised of compensating Israel with advanced US *weaponry and technology* in the air and on the ground. One of the "all-purpose" devices that are mentioned in this context is the J-STAR aircraft. Although it is purported to be a sophisticated airborne warning station, in the Gulf War its operators could not distinguish between Scud launchers and ordinary trucks. Essentially, no airborne warning station can compensate in its output for a land-based warning station because of weather problems, round-the-clock functioning, routine platform malfunctions, and so on. Moreover, to approximate the output of a land-based warning station, there would have to be several such planes, which would also raise the problem of costs (purchase, maintenance, etc.).

Israeli operation of a *satellite* has also been proposed as a means of compensatory intelligence. Yet even if Israel were to have a suitable satellite, could operate it optimally, and indeed had the necessary funds, this device as well could not replace a land-based warning station on the Golan. A static satellite (which hovers at a height of about 36,000 kilometers, at the speed of the Earth's rotation) could only provide limited warning information because of its great height. And a low satellite, flying at a height of about 300 kilometers, passes over a given point every seven hours and has a relatively small range of coverage (about 20 kilometers), so that to obtain continuous information Israel would need a number of such satellites that is beyond its capacity.

Thus, no plane or satellite can constitute a valid substitute or replace the real security guarantee – the IDF's presence on the Golan and the Hermon. One of the former air force commanders expressed this well (1995): "Compensatory systems cannot be better than the thing itself"; and former Chief of Staff Shahak stated: "The Golan has an importance for which no sophisticated weapon or electronic device can substitute." Essentially, those who admire technological substitutes and are prepared to concede the Golan are like someone who compensates amputees with artificial limbs and thinks they are better than the real thing.

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It is also sometimes claimed that in the age of advanced technology and, particularly, surface-to-surface missiles, territory is of no importance. In the specific context of the Golan Heights, Shimon Peres asserted that "it has no value in regard to threats of terrorism, missiles, and nonconventional weapons." According to this fallacious reasoning, no territory within Israel proper has any significance either, including the Negev (about which the Egyptians have already made claims, since "it obstructs the land link between the Arabs"). According to Mr. Peres' prattle, no territory is of any importance once a new, advanced aircraft or weapon system appears in the arena. Actually, the last Gulf War itself demonstrated the importance of territory, since it was only the US ground offensive that brought the war to an end (and not seven weeks of aerial bombings). If Peres and others would ponder the matter, they would realize that territory (like weaponry and manpower) is

one of the three classical pillars of military power. The constriction of any of the three immediately diminishes one's overall power.

The value of territory is measured in terms of its having a commanding battle capability view of the surroundings, its being difficult to conquer aside from its natural and man-made barriers, and its being defensible with relatively small forces. The Golan has these and other features in abundance, quite apart from any risks posed by surface-to-surface or other missiles. In fact, it is precisely Israel's presence on the commanding terrain (with the Hermon and the eastern ridgeline), at a small distance from Damascus, that, as noted, greatly reduces the risk of missiles being fired at Israel's interior.

Incidentally, perhaps today, when Israel seems to have a quite good answer to the dangers of the "all-powerful" surface-to-surface missiles (i.e., the Arrow missile), will terrain regain importance – and justice be done to the Golan?

In short, no technological substitute can replace, in terms of early warning and defensive capability, the presence of the IDF on the Golan. In the era of surface-to-surface missiles, the Heights are even more important to Israel than in the past.

On Syria's "Reliability" in Honoring Agreements

If compensations for the loss of the Golan such as "security arrangements" and advanced military technology do not answer Israel's real strategic needs, perhaps Syria's reliability in honoring agreements can suffice instead?

The debate in Israel over whether Assad keeps his word has not had adequate publicity or longevity, even though this is in fact a most important question. Late in 1994, after a senior officer in Military Intelligence testified in the Knesset that "one may not rely on Assad since he does not keep agreements," Rabin dismissed this on the ground that Assad was quite properly upholding the 1974 Separation of Forces agreement on the Golan. This is essentially true, but since there is a good reason for it (which Rabin did not bother to mention), namely, the IDF's great physical proximity to Damascus, it does not constitute proof. Moreover, even on the Golan there have been minor violations of agreements by the Syrians (for example, the failure to settle Kuneitra, the paving of a road to the Hermon, the illicit deployment of some forces and weaponry, and even one terrorist attack on Ramat Magshimim in 1975).

More blatant Syrian violations of agreements or understandings occurred after its army's entry into Lebanon in 1976. In the Red Lines agreement that was then worked out with Israel, with US mediation, certain limitations were imposed on the Syrians including no deployment of surface-to-air missiles, no flights of planes and helicopters, no entry of its army into southern Lebanon, no forces greater than a brigade, and so on. The Syrians violated all of these, thus helping to set the stage for the 1982 Lebanon War. The blatant violation of the 1989 Taif agreement was noted earlier. Apart from these, have the grave Syrian violations during the cease-fire years of 1949-1967 along the armistice line with Israel been forgotten?

In the Turkish context as well, Syria has not kept its word. In her visit to Israel in late 1994, then-Turkish Prime Minister Ciller disclosed that Damascus had not upheld eighteen of its commitments concerning aid to the Kurds. Even if her number of violated agreements was not precise, Assad's Syria indeed did not keep its promises. One may therefore adopt the formulation that "Assad, like the typical dictator, keeps his word only when it is convenient for him and violates it when it is inconvenient or when he fears that the cost of dishonoring it is greater." It is worth emphasizing that Assad was compelled to honor his commitments to Turkey in the Kurdish context only after, in 1998, Ankara concentrated forces on the border and threatened to invade Syria.

The spirit descended even on Shimon Peres (in October 1994), and he was wise enough to say that “it is likely that the Syrians will attack Israel despite a peace treaty, if extreme elements in Damascus are disappointed with it and redeploy the army.” In other words, Syria with Assad (or without him) cannot be relied on to uphold agreements, and the loss of the Golan is a loss for certain.

On Rights on the Golan, US Presidents’ Commitments, and Precedents

Before turning to outline a desirable solution for Israel on the Golan, it is worth first considering three points that affect its formulation.

First, on the matter of the two sides’ “rights” on the *Golan Heights*. It is commonly thought that since the Golan was taken from Syria in 1967, it therefore belongs to Syria. But there is no legal or moral principle according to which territory conquered in a war must be returned to the state that held it and used it to launch aggression (against populations, settlements, water, etc.). An offender must pay a price for his aggression, at least what he thereby lost; otherwise the international rules become a mockery, and aggressors are actually rewarded instead of penalized. Moreover, Israel has held the Golan much longer than Syria did. The latter controlled the territory from its independence in 1946 to 1967, Israel from that point to the present, that is, thirty-three years vs. twenty-one years. Thus, even in terms of duration of control of the Golan, Israel has the advantage over Syria.

Furthermore, throughout history the Golan did not belong exclusively to Syria. The Golan was already part of the Land of Israel in the days of the First Temple, which was conquered in the time of King David. There are also indications of Jewish settlements there from the times of the Hasmonean kingdoms and King Herod. The legendary war of Gamla was fought there in the context of the Great Revolt. There are many ancient synagogues on the Golan, particularly in Katzrin. Late in the 19th century, Baron Rothschild purchased lands in the areas of the Hauran and the Golan (among other things, the Bnei Yehuda colony was established at that time, lasting for thirty-five years, from 1885 to 1920). And according to the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, the Golan was part of the Land of Israel. Only in 1923 was the international border determined between the British and the French, who then ruled in Syria, and the Golan was transferred to Syria out of alien colonial considerations. Thus, historically speaking the Golan was also part of the Land of Israel, and Syria’s rights to it are not superior to Israel’s, perhaps inferior.

Second, it is worth recalling the *United States’ commitments* to Israel concerning the Golan, as expressed by three recent presidents – Ford, Bush, and Clinton. On September 1, 1975, President Ford wrote to Rabin: “The United States has not yet formulated a final position with respect to Israel’s borders. When it does so, it will give great weight to Israel’s position that any peace agreement with Syria must be based on Israel’s remaining on the Golan Heights.” Even President Bush, who was not one of Israel’s friends, on the eve of the Madrid conference saw fit to repeat President Ford’s undertaking word for word in the “Letter of Guarantees” to Prime Minister Shamir of October 18, 1991. Even though, like his predecessors, he well knew that “Syria would not agree to receive less than Egypt,” he nonetheless promised what he promised. In addition, then-Secretary of State Warren Christopher reiterated in his September 1996 letter to Netanyahu the commitment of the United States and President Clinton to President Ford’s promise of 1975. Israel would be foolish to ignore these three undertakings in the political negotiations, as well as the Joint Chiefs of Staffs’ position in 1967 that the Golan must be included within Israel’s borders.

The document known as the “Pentagon Map” was prepared at the request of President Johnson at the end of the Six Day War. The president asked for an outlining of the minimum borders for Israel’s survival, without it needing to stage a preemptive war in the future. The map that was submitted to the president by a group of experts from the US army, led by the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Wheeler, leaves in Israel’s hands 7,000 square kilometers in the Sinai, the high ground of Judea and

Samaria (though not the Jordan Valley), and the entire Golan Heights, including the area of Kuneitra, which Israel transferred to Syria in 1974. Thus, we see that even now Israel is occupying a much smaller territory than the minimum borders that were determined by a third party based on military considerations alone. On November 15, 1967, the map served as a key document in a discussion held in the office of the president toward the formulation of UN Resolution 242 (on November 24). The definition “secure and recognized borders” in Resolution 242 refers to the borders of this map.



Since the Madrid conference, in which the principle of “territories for peace” was established, not a single Israeli Prime Minister has made use of this document.

And third, one needs to regard the *precedents* for resolving issues such as the Golan. There is indeed the Egyptian precedent, where Israel stupidly conceded the last grain of sand. Assad, as noted, will not permit himself to receive less after waiting so long. Yet he must pay a price for not having climbed onto Sadat’s wagon at the time, and even working against it for many years. There is also, however, the Jordanian precedent of October 1994. Although in the treaty with Jordan a number of areas that Israel had conquered (in Aram-Naharayim and the Arava) were transferred to its sovereignty, these

territories were in fact leased to Israel for twenty-five years with an unlimited option to renew, and Israeli farmers continue to work the land there.

Then, of course, there is the precedent of Alexandretta, which was taken from Syria by Turkey in 1939. Even though Syria does not recognize Turkey's rule there, it fears quarreling with Ankara over this piece of land. A few years ago I was surprised to see in an Arab newspaper a headline on the subject that read: "We Want Joint Rule"; that is, Damascus, knowing it would never retrieve Alexandretta, which has been settled by many thousands of Turks and is several times larger than the Golan, at least entertains joint rule with Turkey.

On the Functional Solution

From all of the foregoing, it is clear that Israel should have stated that the Golan is not a subject for negotiations at all (except perhaps for the four Druze villages and their 15,000 residents). But to try and limit the friction, Israel could propose a solution that would somewhat go in Syria's direction while retaining its presence and control on the Golan. Since, because of the small dimensions of the Golan and the presence of the ridgeline that dominates the area to its east, a territorial compromise (i.e., division of the territory) does not appear feasible, the desirable solution would rather be functional and involve the division of sovereignty, control, and maintenance. The functional solution is based on the following elements: (a) sovereignty over the Golan would be in Syria's hands; (b) Israel would *lease* the Golan from Syria for decades (ninety-nine or even forty-nine years, as in the Jewish National Fund's formulation) and would even pay fees for the lease; (c) the political settlement would not have to be one of full peace and could even be a nonbelligerency agreement; (d) the two armies would reduce their presence on the Golan, and distance themselves from each other.

This solution, to be sure, has its drawbacks (like every agreement), and the biggest of them is that Syria will not agree to it. However, Israeli readiness to transfer even sovereignty over the Golan to Syria is no small matter. The Syrians would also benefit from an annual payment for the lease, and in their economic condition that too is not something to dismiss. At the same time, Damascus would not have to pay the price of a full peace treaty and normalization, which it finds so unpleasant. The distancing of the IDF would greatly reduce the potential threat to Damascus, and Israel would enjoy a similar threat reduction while retaining its presence and civilian control. If Syria were to prefer a solution of joint control of the Heights, this would also constitute progress in the right direction. Indeed, it would signal a true change in the direction of real peace and many of the possible hindrances would be overcome.

The Syrians, nevertheless, will not agree to a functional solution (just as they do not agree to a territorial solution if any at all). But since when must the solution depend only on the Arab will? Does Israel not have a firm stance and vital interests that must be strongly maintained? Is it only Israel that has to take the biggest step and expose itself to intolerable dangers? If that is the Israeli attitude, then it is certain that the Arabs and the Syrians will never truly compromise with Israel. And if the Syrians are obstinate, Israel's answer must be firm: you don't accept our proposals; we're sorry. Indeed, the "peace" with Syria will never be better than that with Egypt, and the peace with the latter can only, with difficulty, be deemed worthy of the name and the price. The price that was paid to Egypt was excessive from the start, but one could somehow justify it on the basis that this was the first peace treaty with an Arab state (and the largest of them), and, principally, that the vast expanses of the Sinai made such a treaty possible in the first place. Syria, however, which boycotted and worked hard to undermine the Egyptian peace, does not have to receive what Egypt received. Moreover, as noted, there is the Jordanian model of leasing territory, which enables a reasonable compromise. It is not by chance that Syria expressed great displeasure over the Jordanian "model" – lest it affect the Golan.

An instructive oddity may be helpful here. On August 11, 1993, an item was published according to which the Prime Minister of Ukraine proposed renting to the Russians the Port of Sevastopol, the main naval base in the Black Sea. He declared: “For a long time I have claimed that Russia will not leave Sevastopol, and therefore one must make it available to Russia on a rental basis. Thus Russia will demonstrate that it accepts that Sevastopol in fact belongs to Ukraine.” And, indeed, the Russian navy is there.

Summing Up

The central issue in this essay is whether genuine peace with Syria is possible, and whether peace with it is necessary in the first place. It may be asserted that real peace with the Arabs and specifically with Syria is not feasible, and certainly is not worth its terrible price – the loss of the Golan. Let us recall that the term “real peace” refers to a situation where peace is actually a value and not a catchword for “getting back all of the territories” from Israel in the process of reducing it to a shriveled entity. “Peace”, as the Arabs conceive it, is not a lofty goal in itself but a means to the destruction of Israel or to its collapse from within. True, one makes peace with enemies – but with erstwhile enemies who have changed their ways and their character, and with whom there is no existential conflict of interest. But among the Arabs and the Syrians, who prattle about “peace” and “justice”, there are no authentic intentions or processes in the direction of genuine peace. True peace cannot be tantamount to “land”; whoever advocates “land for peace” indicates at the start that such a peace can be of no great value. True, there is no real peace even with Egypt, but if the “consolation” is the quiet that prevails on that front, such quiet has existed on the Golan for over twenty-seven years even without “peace”.

Not only is real peace with the Syrians something that is not possible, but examination of the Golan’s strategic importance to Israel indicates that “peace” whose price is relinquishment of all of the Heights is neither necessary nor worth that price. Only the callous could contemplate the uprooting of seventeen thousand residents from thirty-three flourishing settlements where they have struck roots. This is an inhuman act that no peace is worth. Only the foolish would concede a vital asset that precisely deters war and the launching of missiles against Israel, while preserving real strategic parity between the sides. The gravity even of a withdrawal to the international border of 1923 is no less than that of a withdrawal to the notorious lines of June 4, 1967, and in any case will enable the Syrians to fish, pump, and “splash” in the Kinneret, let alone dominating the Huleh Valley, the lake, the Yarmouk River, and so on. Moreover, ceding the entire Golan plus would also force us to withdraw from all of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza – and one day from all the Land of Israel as well.

The “security arrangements” that were already agreed with the Syrians in 1995, and remain relevant today, are a mockery. Even an American warning station on the Hermon (and even with some Israeli presence, which is basically doubtful) is no substitute for essential security arrangements: a drastic cutback of the Syrian army, a change in its structure, and its redeployment to north of Damascus. Early warning in the context of the short distances between the Golan and Damascus is not equivalent to real security arrangements. To involve the United States on the Golan would be folly: it would increase Israel’s dependency and eventually damage the special relations between the two countries. In addition, the Israeli public is being deceived with prattle of “We are strong” – i.e., we can shrink and still defend ourselves. On the contrary, we need every strategic asset, among other things precisely because we are “the few against the hostile many” and due to our great sensitivity to casualties. The Golan in Israel’s hands is a solid guarantee against war, missiles, and casualties. A “peace agreement” with Syria, on the other hand, which at present is weak, will lead to its military and economic strengthening as in the case of Egypt, and moreover by no less than the United States. This will only eventually increase the potential threat emanating from Damascus.

Israel has at least as much “right” to the Golan as Syria and in fact has held it substantially longer. Also, Israel will commit a serious blunder if it does not make use of the undertakings by Presidents Ford, Bush, and Clinton regarding its continued presence on the Golan even “in time of peace”. The “linkage” between southern Lebanon and the Golan is another act of folly: not only does Israel compromise with the bloodletting of its soldiers and occasional Katyushas on its Galilee citizens, it is even willing to give away the Golan for “quiet” in southern Lebanon. Syria has crucial interests in Lebanon, and to threaten them could alter the strategic situation, eliminate the unfortunate linkage, and prevent the real tragedy – the relinquishment of the Golan.

If the Syrians were prepared for a true settlement, namely, acceptance of the Israeli presence on the Golan, a solution could be found such as a long-term lease. There is a precedent for such a lease in the Jordanian-Israeli agreement of 1994. But since the chances of that are poor, Israel must remain firm in its presence on the Golan.