

## EZ – אקטואליה

### **Damascus at the gate**

By Ari Shavit

Is it possible to achieve peace with Syria? It's doubtful. It's true that Damascus is at the gate and Syrian President Bashar Assad is sending increasingly strong peace signals, and it's also true that Syria is not an inseparable part of the axis of extremism threatening the Middle East today. After all, the secular nationalist regime in Damascus is supposed to be standing up to Shi'ite Islamic extremism, and not serving as its bridgehead to the Arab world. But a peace agreement with Israel is a genuine challenge to the minority Alawite government and could endanger the stability of the anachronistic Baathist regime.

A peace agreement with Israel would deny Syria its identity as the flag bearer of Arab nationalism and would turn it into a marginal Middle Eastern country. A peace agreement would bring prosperity to Israel and Lebanon, and maybe even economic cooperation between the two countries, and would turn their large neighbor into an unimportant, backward country living in their shadow. There is no reason why the Syrians should agree to that.

The Golan Heights may be breathtaking, but the price Syrian may have to pay for its return could greatly reduce the chances of implementing such an agreement. Nevertheless, Israel cannot permit itself to continue to refuse making peace. It cannot treat Bashar Assad as it treated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1972. The bleak prospects for achieving peace should sober expectations and lead to greater caution, but the pessimistic outlook should not cause total paralysis. If the Syrians really are ready for peace, we should know that rather than assume it. We should do everything possible not only to achieve peace, but also to prevent war.

The leadership of the Israel Defense Forces sees the situation as follows: In the wake of the Lebanon war, the Syrian regime has reached a point of either-or: either diplomatic progress, or military escalation. The era of the status quo is over. The 30 years of no war and no peace in the Golan Heights have come to an end. That is the true, historical significance of the second Lebanon war.

The signals from Damascus are not only of a peaceful nature; there are signals about putting an end to the quiet on the Golan Heights, about applying the principle of resistance on the Golan and about replicating the Hezbollah model there. The IDF does not assume that Syria will initiate war against Israel in the coming year, but senior officers believe we are at a crossroads. If there is no diplomatic process there will not be quiet. If there is no quiet there will be escalation. And escalation could very well spiral into war.

The mission of the Israeli government must be clear: to make every effort to prevent the situation from deteriorating and to prove to the Israeli public that if violence erupts, it is not because of Israel's refusal. The soldiers who would be sent to the next war must know that their government did everything possible to prevent war, that every last opportunity was exploited, that every knock at the door was answered.

U.S. President George W. Bush is not interested in Israeli-Syrian peace. Israel is  beholden to President Bush and is committed to his honor, but if he errs on the Syrian issue as he did in Iraq, it is not his citizens who will pay the price.

Israel does not have to be brazen in confronting those sitting in Washington, but neither can it behave like its vassal. Israel cannot act in contradiction to its interests only because it has been told to do so by a failing U.S. administration in its final days. The Syrian front is both sensitive and complex. There is no black and white here, and no absolute good versus absolute evil.

Therefore, when embarking on a diplomatic process we have to consider the arguments of those who oppose it. The chances of achieving a genuine peace are not great, and Syria might try to use negotiations to lure Israel into a trap. We have to come up with new kinds of proposals and adhere strictly to our red lines. But we must get the show on the road, using caution, wisdom and creativity.

## VOCABULARY

achieve - להשיג, לבצע	bleak - קר, עגום
doubtful - מפקפק, מוטל בספק	prospects - תקווה, סיכוי
Damascus - דמשק	sober - פיכח, צלול
increasingly - במידה גוברת, יותר ויותר	expectations - ציפיות
inseparable - בלתי נפרד	pessimistic - פסימי, רואה שחורות
axis - ציר	paralysis - שיתוק
extremism - דגילה בקיצוניות	prevent - למנוע
threatening - מאיים	wake - שובל, נתיב, במהלך (כפועל- להעיר)
secular - חילוני	escalation - הסלמה
regime - משטר	status quo - המצב הקיים, סטטוס קוו
Shi'ite - שיעי	significance - משמעות, חשיבות
bridgehead - ראש גשר	principle - עקרון
genuine - אמיתי, מקורי	resistance - התנגדות
minority - מיעוט	replicating - להעתיק
Alawite - עלאווי, זרם באיסלאם	initiate - לזום, לפתוח ב-
endanger - לסכן	crossroads - צומת דרכים
stability - יציבות	spiral - להתפתל כבורג
anachronistic - מיושן, שעבר זמנו, אנכרוניסטי	deteriorating - להתדרדר, להחמיר
deny - לשלול, להתכחש	exploited - לנצל, למצה
the flag bearer of - ביטוי, נושאת דגל, אם רוחנית	beholden - מחוייב, אסיר תודה
marginal - שולי, זעום	errs - לטעות, לשגות
prosperity - שגשוג, הצלחה, שפע	brazen - להתחצף
cooperation - שיתוף פעולה	confronting - לעמת, להתעמת
The Golan Heights - רמת הגולן	vassal - אריס, משועבד
breathtaking - עוצר נשימה	in contradiction - בסתירה
reduce - לצמצם, להקטין	administration - ניהול, ממשל
implementing - ליישם, לבצע	embarking - להתחיל
Nevertheless - בכל זאת, אף על פי כן	lure - לפתות
	adhere - לדבוק