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Lunch in Damascus

ONCE, WHILE traveling in a taxi, I had an argument with the driver - a profession associated in Israel with extreme right-wing views. I tried in vain to convince him of the desirability of peace with the Arabs. In our country, which has never seen a single day of peace in the last hundred years, peace can seem like something out of science fiction.

Suddenly I had an inspiration. "When we have peace," I said, "You can take your taxi in the morning and go to Damascus, have lunch there with real authentic Hummus and come back home in the evening."

He jumped at the idea. "Wow," he exclaimed, "If that happens, I shall take you with me for nothing!"

"And I shall treat you to lunch," I responded.

He continued to dream. "If I could go to Damascus in my car, I could drive on from there all the way to Paris!"

BASHAR AL-ASSAD has done it again. He has succeeded in confusing the Israeli government.

As long as he voices the ritual threat to liberate the Golan Heights by force, it does not upset anybody. After all, that only confirms what many want to hear: that there is no way to have peace with Syria, that sooner or later we shall have a war with them.

Why is that good? Simple: peace with Syria would mean giving back the Golan Heights (Syrian territory by any definition). No peace, no need to give them back.

But when Bashar starts to talk peace, we are in trouble. That is a sinister plot. It may, God forbid, create a situation that would compel us to return the territory.

Therefore, we should not even speak about it. The news must be buried in some remote corner of the papers and at the end of the news on TV, as just "another speech of Assad". The government rejects them "on the threshold", adding that it cannot even be discussed until...

Until what? Until he stops supporting Hizbullah. Until Syria expels the representatives of Hamas and the other Palestinian organizations. Until regime change takes place in Syria. Until a Western-style democracy is installed there. In short, until he registers as a member of the Zionist organization.

THE RELATIONS between Israel and Syria have a documented history of at least 2859 years. In the year 853 B.C. Israel is mentioned - for the first time, it seems - in an authentic document outside the Bible. Twelve monarchs of the region, led by the kings of Damascus and Israel, united against the growing threat of Assyria. The decisive battle took place at Karkar (in the north of today's Syria). According to an Assyrian document, 20 thousand soldiers and 1200 chariots of Damascus fought side by side with 10 thousand soldiers and 2000 chariots of Ahab, king of Israel. It is not quite clear which side won.

But that was a temporary alliance. For most of the time, Israel and Aram-Damascus fought against each other for regional supremacy. Ahab died a hero's death in one of these wars against Aram, just two years after the battle against the Assyrians.

In modern times, the Syrians (although then still under French colonial rule) strenuously opposed the Zionist enterprise right from the beginning. But they also opposed the Palestinian national movement. That is grounded in history: in the Arabic language, the name al-Sham ("the North"), as Syria is called, includes the entire territory between Egypt and Turkey. Therefore, in Arab consciousness, not only Lebanon, but Jordan, Palestine and Israel as well are really part of Syria.

When Yasser Arafat created the independent Palestinian national movement at the end of the 1950s, the Syrians demanded to be acknowledged as the protectors of the Palestinian people. When he refused, the Syrians threw the entire Palestinian leadership into prison. (Only the wife of Abu Jihad, Intissar al-Wazir, remained at liberty and took over the command of the Fatah fighters - thus becoming the first woman in modern times to command an Arab fighting force.)

Naturally, all the enemies of Arafat found refuge in Damascus, and that is the original reason for the presence of some leaders of Hamas and other organizations there. They were more of a threat to the PLO than to Israel.

IN THE 1948 war, the Syrian army was the only Arab army that was not defeated. They continued to occupy some Israeli territory. Along this border, many incidents took place (mostly initiated by an officer by the name of Ariel Sharon). In the end, the Israeli army occupied the Golan Heights in the Six-day war, for the outbreak of which Syria bears some responsibility.

Since then, all the relations between Israel and Syria have been centered on this occupied territory. Its return is a paramount Syrian aim. Israel has applied Israeli law there (which, contrary to the accepted view, means less than annexation). Hafez al-Assad re-conquered it in the 1973 war, but in the end was pushed back to the approaches of Damascus. Since then, the Syrians have been trying to harass Israel mostly by means of Hizbullah.

Once upon a time, the idea of an "Eastern Front" - a coordinated attack by Jordan, Syria and Iraq - used to cause nightmares in Israel. The prophecy of Jeremiah (1, 14), "Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the

inhabitants of the land", echoed through the war-rooms of the army High Command. Since then we have made peace with Jordan, Iraq has been blown to smithereens by the Americans, with the enthusiastic support of Israel and its American lobby. But the Syrians are still considered a menace, because they are allied with Iran and connected with Hizbullah.

Is it worthwhile for us to live in this situation in order to keep the Golan Heights? Common sense says no. If we reach a peace agreement with Syria, it will automatically entail an agreement with Hizbullah, too. Without Syrian consent, Hizbullah cannot keep an efficient military force, since practically all Hizbullah's arms have to come from Syria or pass through Syria. Without Syrian support, Hizbullah will become a purely Lebanese party and cease to constitute a threat to us.

Moreover, Syria is a thoroughly secular country. When the Muslim Brotherhood rebelled against Assad Sr, he drowned them in blood. Also, the great majority of Syrians are Sunni. When Syria makes peace with Israel, it will have no reason to remain allied with the fanatical Shiite Iran.

So why don't we make peace with Syria?

AT THIS time, there are two reasons: the one domestic, the other foreign.

The domestic reason is the existence of 20 thousand settlers on the Golan Heights, who are far more popular than the West Bank settlers. They are not religious fanatics, and their settlements were set up under the auspices of the Labor Party. All Israeli governments have been afraid to touch them.

That is the real reason for the failure of all the attempts to negotiate with Syria. Yitzhak Rabin thought about it and drew back. He argued that we should first of all concentrate on settling the Palestinian issue. Ehud Barak almost came to an agreement with Syria, but escaped at the last moment. The only question that remained open was almost ludicrous: should the Syrians reach the shoreline of the Sea of Tiberias (the situation prevailing before the Six-day war) or stay at a distance of a few dozen meters (according to the border fixed between the British, then ruling Palestine, and the French, then ruling Syria). In popular parlance: will Assad dangle his long feet in the water of the lake? For Assad Sr. that was a question of honor.

Is it worthwhile to risk for this the lives of thousands of Israelis and Syrians, who may die in another war?

Until Israel has a government ready to answer this question and to confront the settlers, there will be no agreement with Syria.

The second reason for rejecting peace with Syria is connected with the United States. Syria belongs to George Bush's "axis of evil". The American president doesn't give a damn for the long-range interests of Israel, what is important to him is to achieve some sort of victory in the Middle East. The destruction of the

Syrian regime ("a victory for democracy") will compensate him for the Iraq fiasco.

No Israeli government - and certainly not that of Olmert - would dare to disobey the American president. Therefore, it is self-evident that all peace feelers from Assad will be rejected "on the threshold". Tsipi Livni, who last week opened a new front against Olmert and presented herself almost as a peace-lover, opposes the start of negotiations with Syria as well.

THIS AFFAIR throws some light on the complex relations between Israel and the United States: who is wagging who - does the dog wag its tail or the tail its dog?

Olmert says that we must ignore Assad's peace offers, because we must not help him to escape Bush's wrath. Let's dwell on this utterance for a moment.

An Israeli patriot would, of course, have said exactly the opposite: If Assad is ready to make peace with us - even if only because he is afraid of the Americans - we should jump at this opportunity and exploit this situation to achieve at long last peace on our northern front.

Last week Olmert made a remarkable declaration: "As long as I am Prime Minister, we shall not give up the Golan for all eternity!" What does that mean? Either Olmert believes that his term of office coincides with God's term of office, and he will rule in eternity - or in Olmert's world, eternity extends to four years, at most.

Anyhow, until then, my taxi-driver and I shall have to wait for our lunch in Damascus.