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Bashar and Olmert: The First Test

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Bashar al-Asad's confirmation, in an interview to the Qatari daily al-Watan, that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had given him a commitment to return the entire Golan Heights to Syria has one meaning: Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations are warming up. For the first time since the failure of the Clinton-Hafiz al-Asad Geneva summit of March 2000, there is a real chance for the resumption of peace negotiations between Israel and Syria, and perhaps even for a breakthrough.

As the results of the 2006 Lebanon War gradually became clear to both sides, the Israeli and Syrian leaderships began exchanging messages expressing interest in restarting the long-stalled peace negotiations. Yet, up until recently, they produced no results. In fact, imbedded in these exchanges was a fear of the consequences of resuming negotiations, reflecting the lack of genuine political will to move ahead, not to mention an unwillingness to pay the price which would be entailed by a peace agreement.

Over the years, Syria's unwavering precondition for the resumption of the peace process was an Israeli commitment to full withdrawal from the Golan Heights, to the 4 June 1967 lines. Israel's difficulty in accepting this demand was at the root of the failure of the Syrian-Israeli negotiations conducted with Hafiz al-Asad by the Barak government in 1999-2000. Since then, no Israeli prime minister has been ready to commit himself to full withdrawal before Syria clarified what it intended to offer Israel as a quid pro quo.

Now, however, it seems that Prime Minister Olmert is prepared to comply with the Syrian demand. In this, he is following in the footsteps of Yitzhak Rabin, who tendered a similar commitment (the Rabin deposit) in August 1993, when he made it clear to the Syrians that in return for a peace agreement acceptable to Israel, he would be ready to withdraw to the 4 June 1967 lines. All subsequent prime ministers expressed their readiness to accept Rabin's commitment. Yet at

the moment of truth, each of them got cold feet, refusing to take the political risk entailed in acceding to a Syrian return to the Galilee shoreline.

For Olmert, accepting the Rabin deposit is the inevitable outcome of pursuing a peace deal with Syria. It has long been clear to Israeli leaders that neither Hafiz al-Asad, nor his son and successor Bashar, would follow in the footsteps of Egypt's Anwar al-Sadat and undertake dramatic public initiatives and symbolic gestures on behalf of Arab-Israeli peace. Hence, it would be up to Israel to make the requisite initial gestures towards Damascus in order to pave the way to an agreement.

This raises the question of why Bashar chose to disclose the Olmert commitment, delivered to him by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. There are several possible answers. The Syrians may have feared that the existence of a secret Turkish channel between Syria and Israel would be leaked to the Israeli media, and thus preferred to be the first to make it public, in order not to find themselves on the defensive. More likely, the Syrians may have wanted to test Olmert's seriousness, to check whether the message delivered to them was reliable, and whether Olmert would be capable of weathering the inevitable criticism from portions of the Israeli public. The fact that the Israeli Prime Minister's Office declined to deny the news of the commitment has been understood as a tacit confirmation of its veracity. Syria, incidentally, was not worried about the embarrassment it might cause Olmert. Supporting an Israeli prime minister in the difficult challenge he may be expected to face among his own public has never been on Syria's agenda.

Olmert and Bashar have successfully passed their first joint test. Olmert dared to do what no other Israeli prime minister in the last decade had done, and Bashar reacted relatively positively, praising Olmert for his efforts to advance peace.

Nonetheless, a word of caution is in order. Notwithstanding the fact that Jimmy Carter concluded his recent visit to Damascus by declaring that 85% of the problems between Israel and Syria had already been settled during the previous rounds of the peace negotiations, the picture is far more opaque. First, all understandings reached between Syria and Israel in the past have been left unwritten, and are hence given to interpretation. Second, the current reality on the ground and the overall regional configuration have changed substantially in the last eight years. For example, earlier Syrian-Israeli understandings regarding Hizballah were reached at a time when the organization had only a few thousand rockets of limited range. Now, however, the organization has in its possession tens of thousands of advanced rockets that can reach as far as Israel's nuclear reactor in Dimona, in southern Israel. In addition, Syria's primary regional ally, Iran, and their Palestinian joint client, Hamas – both of whom embody a hard-line, rejectionist position towards Israel - have far more weight than they had in 2000. Finally, achieving real progress in the Israeli-Syrian peace process will require active American participation. So far, the US has not reacted officially to the latest Olmert-Bashar exchange. However, it concurrently revealed information

regarding the Israeli attack in northern Syria in September 2007 against a nuclear facility under construction with North Korean assistance. To be sure, the revelation was not designed as a response to the incipient resumption of Syrian-Israeli negotiations. Nevertheless, it served as another reminder of the low point that Syrian-American relations have reached in recent years, and the lack of any readiness in the Bush administration to change its attitude towards Syria.

In conclusion, much water will flow through the River Jordan and into the Sea of Galilee before the Syrians are allowed to wade into them. Nonetheless, it seems clear that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has taken the first plunge.

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