
Israel

Barak's prospects for peace with Syria

by Dean Andromidas

The landslide election victory of Ehud Barak as Israel's next Prime Minister holds great promise for peace, but there is still much leeway for destabilization. First and foremost, Benjamin Netanyahu is still Prime Minister, still more warhawk than lame duck. Barak has until July 1 to form a governing coalition.

Second, the paucity of public statements by the Prime Minister-elect have left all Middle East political leaders in a state of impatient expectation, and Palestinians, especially, are feeling considerable frustration. Barak's silence is due to his painstaking efforts at cobbling together a coalition from among the 15 political parties which are represented in the 120-seat Knesset (parliament). The task is made more difficult by the fact that Barak's own One Israel Alliance, the successor to the Labor Party, won only 26 seats. Another, perhaps more likely reason, is an intention by Barak to resume negotiations for a peace agreement with Syria, which would involve an Israeli withdrawal from most of the Syrian Golan Heights. For this task, he would want to form a government based on a prior agreement to enter those negotiations and not after, which would leave open the possibility of a government crisis.

So far, no party has officially agreed to the political guidelines laid down by Barak for joining his government. It is expected that the left-wing, pro-peace Meretz party and the Center Party, led by former Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, will form the core of the new government. But, Barak also wants a broader coalition that could include the right-wing Likud, the Heredim Shas Party, most of whose members are Sephardic Jews, and the extreme right-wing National Religious Party. One source told *EIR*, "If Barak can get a government that commands 80 or 90 seats [in the Knesset], he would be able to get an agreement [with Syria] without having to hold a referendum." Such a majority would help to avoid a protracted and divisive national political debate, and forestall attempts to destabilize the new government.

During the election, Barak had pledged to withdraw Israeli troops from the "security zone" in southern Lebanon, within a year. Such a withdrawal—unless done unilaterally, which is unlikely—would require an agreement with Syria first, since it maintains 35,000 troops in Lebanon and func-

tions as arbiter among Lebanon's manifold political factions.

The consensus in Israel for a deal with Syria, along the lines of the 1979 Sinai agreement with Egypt, is far greater than publicly acknowledged. One leading political commentator told *EIR*: "Listen, the details of a what a peace deal with Syria would look like have been around for 20 years, it just a question of getting on with it."

At events over the last three weeks of May point to the possibility of an early start to serious negotiations.

Barak's advisers have let it be known that negotiations with Syria would begin where they left off, when they were disrupted in February 1996, which has been a key demand of the Syrians. It is significant that Barak, who had been Prime Minister Shimon Peres's Chief of Staff at the time, was involved in those talks. Another player in the 1996 negotiations, which were conducted in Washington, was Itamar Rabinovich, who was then Ambassador to the United States. Barak has now named him as his personal envoy to President William Clinton.

The Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* revealed that, during Netanyahu's regime, Israel had been holding secret discussions with Syria along no fewer than three tracks, all of which Netanyahu made sure bore no fruit. The first, which had the full backing of the Clinton administration, was led by Maj. Gen. Danny Yatom, who had met Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Walid Mualem several times. Their talks led to a Israeli draft proposal involving input from then Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, and then Chief of Staff Lipkan Shahak. This track blew up when Netanyahu ordered the Mossad to assassinate Khaled Meshal, a leader of the Palestinian Hamas. The outrage, committed in Amman, Jordan, failed miserably. Both Mordechai and Shahak will probably have portfolios in Barak's government, while Yatom, who resigned as head of Mossad, because he disputed Netanyahu's order to kill Meshal, has been tapped to become Barak's chief of cabinet.

Netanyahu decided to play along with the considerable institutional support for a deal with Syria, looking for the next opportunity to blow up negotiations. To begin with, he pursued several tracks that would all exclude involvement by the Clinton administration. These included: mediation by the foreign minister of Oman, and another making use of the European Union Middle East Envoy, Miguel Moratinos. A third involved former U.S. Ambassador to Austria Ronald Lauder, heir to the Estée Lauder cosmetics empire, and one of the moneybags behind Netanyahu and Ariel Sharon.

Although the negotiations broke off at the time of the 1996 elections, they had always been doomed to fail, since the Syrians knew full well that any agreement without the full involvement of Clinton's circles in Washington was less than a bad joke.

Peace may break out

Developments in southern Lebanon, the bellwether for relations between Israel and Syria, point to greater momentum

for negotiations. The security zone—a swath of territory several kilometers deep into south Lebanon, which the Israeli army occupies—is in reality a geographical extension of the Golan Heights. This area has been a zone of low-intensity conflict between the Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas, and the Israeli Defense Forces and its proxy, the South Lebanon Army (SLA). Fighting and skirmishes have been kept below the threshold of international crisis by the so-called “Grapes of Wrath committee,” which includes representatives of Israel, Lebanon, the United States, and France.

At the end of May, the SLA pulled out of the Jezzine enclave, just outside the Israeli security zone, which the SLA had occupied for over a decade. The move was seen as a harbinger of an actual withdrawal of Israeli troops. It was also seen, not unrealistically, as the first sign of the collapse of the SLA, which was financed and armed by the Israelis to help patrol the security zone. It has even been rumored that its commander, Gen. Antoine Lahad, is about to resign and move to France.

Nonetheless, fighting has continued between the Hezbollah, and the SLA and Israeli Defense Forces. One observer commented that the escalation has been prompted by the Hezbollah and its Syrian backers, as a signal to the Israelis that a deal in Lebanon will come only after—and not before—an agreement with Syria. *Ha'aretz's* editorial on June 3, warned Israel not to attempt to bypass Syria in seeking a solution to the

Lebanese quagmire: “Israel must quickly seek a comprehensive arrangement with Syria,” not just in terms of securing the Lebanon-Israel border, but the Syrian Golan Heights as well.

The dead hand of Bibi Netanyahu

As we said, although Netanyahu has one foot in the political grave, as long as he remains Prime Minister, he has enough slack to continue his belligerent provocations. Most important has been the move to annex several square kilometers that would connect the Jewish settlement of Maale Adumin on the West Bank to Israel. The annexation would hand a territory the size of Tel Aviv to this settlement of 20,000, and would bisect the West Bank. The Palestinians have called for a “Day of Anger,” and are planning demonstrations, marches, and other protests.

Sparking Palestinian-Israeli violence strikes at the greatest vulnerability of the Syrian track: Should a settlement with Syria precede the final status negotiations with the Palestinians, the latter would take it as an attempt to weaken them leading up to final status talks with Israel. Widespread Israeli-Palestinian violence would make it impossible for a serious Syrian effort to get off the ground.

Above all, concrete progress between Israel and Syria awaits the formation of Barak’s government and a Barak-Clinton meeting, which he has said he would want at the earliest opportunity.

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