

what is accepted and not accepted by Syria. Syria rejects secret direct talks or contacts with Israel.... Anything Syria does in this regard will be announced to the public.”

Two days later, it was reported that the “third party” Assad had referred to was Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who had delivered a message to Assad from Olmert, declaring that Israel was prepared to turn over the Golan Heights to Syria, in return for peace. (Israel captured the Golan Heights during the 1967 War.) Assad confirmed this report one day later.

On April 24, commentators in both Israel and Syria referred to these exchanges, especially in the context of the Carter visit, as reflecting the strongest desire by Israel and Syria to enter peace negotiations, since President Bush came into office. The London-based Arabic daily *Al-Hayat* published a commentary on April 23 by Dr. Fawzi Shoeibi, who heads the Data and Strategic Studies Center in Syria and who is close to Assad. Under the title “The time has come to break through the Syrian-Israeli channel,” Shoeibi cited the press dialogue reported above as going a long way to fulfill the three conditions for peace talks, which Assad laid out in a speech given in July 2007. These include an official, public statement by Israel that it wants peace with Syria; the return of the entire Golan Heights to Syria; and talks not simply over the return of territory, but over arrangements for peace and security. (The full statement follows this article.)

Shoeibi noted Olmert’s declaration that Syria is not a nuclear risk for Israel, nullifying previous statements, and even constituting an Israeli apology for the bombing of a target in Syria in September 2007. These developments demonstrated, he said, that “it is clear analytically that the Syrian track has become a regional and international choice.”

On the same day that the Shoeibi article was excerpted in *Ha’aretz*, the daily reported that its own Turkish sources not only confirmed their role as mediators, but said that their efforts have reached “a level of ripeness unmatched in the past.” A lead editorial in *Ha’aretz*, titled “The time is ripe for negotiations with Syria,” references the Shoeibi article, writing that now that the Bush Administration is on its way out, it and all the Presidential candidates, including John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama, would support an Israel-Syria peace agreement as key for the region. *Ha’aretz* concluded that it is time for Israel to open talks: “Nothing contributes to Israel’s security more than a peace accord,” and such an accord “is endorsed not only by bleeding hearts, but by distinctly security-minded figures....”

In an attempt to sabotage this process, the Cheney-Bush Administration had the CIA present testimony in Congress claiming to prove that the site bombed by Israel in Syria was a nuclear facility, being built with the cooperation of North Korea. *Ha’aretz* reported that Israeli officials explicitly did not want these hearings to be held, and “expressed concerns” that the hearings could “re-ignite tensions between Jerusalem and Damascus.”

Guest Commentary

It’s Time To Launch An Israel-Syria Track

by Dr. Imad Fawzi Shueibi

This commentary by the general director of the Data and Strategic Studies Centre in Damascus, Syria, appeared in the London-based Arab daily Al Hayat, on April 23, under the headline “It’s Time for the Israeli-Syrian Track To Be Launched.” The translation from Arabic was provided by the Centre’s website; subheads have been added.

On July 19 2007, the President of Syria, Bashar Al-Assad, presented a set of conditions for the resuming of negotiations on the Syrian-Israeli track, and they were as follows:

First, Israeli officials are required to make an official and clear and unequivocal declaration of their desire to achieve peace. Otherwise, if they keep saying we will not negotiate with Syria, while sending us secret messages, that will be unacceptable. Let it be a clear and serious declaration.

Secondly, presenting guarantees [by the Israelis] for returning all the lands, because Syria cannot enter into negotiations with Israel, about whose content it has no knowledge. The reason is that the experience with it [Israel] has made Syria skeptical, and it is an experience which has damaged the confidence and trust which was already non-existent before the peace process.

Thirdly, there must be guarantees, so that the Syrians would be sure that the negotiations would not be about whether the land would be returned or not, because the whole land will be returned anyway, but would be about the security arrangements and the nature of peaceful relations, as was the case during [former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak] Rabin’s time in the 1990s.

If we observe the latest statements by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, we notice that there a clear response in principle to the first condition which was presented by President Al-Assad, i.e., a clear declaration of the desire to achieve peace. In addition to this, the statement by Olmert that Syria does not represent a nuclear threat to Israel can be considered as an abolishment of previous accusations, and an apology, from the enemy’s position, for the violation of Syrian territories which took place in September 2007.

Note also that the repeated references to returning the Golan give the impression that Israel has given the third party—at least, a party in whom President Al-Assad had put

his trust in one of his speeches—the pledges or guarantees demanded by Syria for launching the peace process on the Syrian-Israeli track. Thus, any new negotiations will not start from nothing, but will take into consideration all that has been achieved previously. There will be no return to point zero, and no denial of previous understandings that were achieved in the previous negotiations and the efforts exerted thereupon.

Everything indicates that Syria is back to square one, which means a regional situation really necessitating the launching of the peace process, because the Israelis have but one of two choices after the defeat in 2006 [the Lebanon invasion]:

- Going for a military action which will be going beyond foolishness into madness, which will threaten to collapse for the second—and last time, maybe—the Israeli military doctrine which is based on exchanging the Israeli civilian deaths by the civilian deaths of others. This is a choice which will put Israel in the face of the potential of expanding the war to the level of total explosion, which it will not endure and will not be able to determine its safe direction or exit.

- Or, going to a solid peace process with the Syrians, who will not accept this to become a setup to cut them into pieces strategically, or pull them into the game of different tracks in order to put pressure on the Palestinians.

In any case, it is clear—analytically—that the Syrian track has become a regional and international choice, in spite of all the verbal pressures coming from Washington, which betray the magnitude of the debacle experienced by the fragile Bush Administration, which is dragging itself into ideological declarations as usual. The choice of the Republican Party is to create (a climate or a peaceful outcome before September), to prepare the climate for John McCain's Presidential campaign.

In addition, the Bush family are blaming him [President George W. Bush] for the collapse of the family's reputation, and at the same time demanding from Bush a peaceful achievement in the Middle East to preserve the family's legacy and to prepare another son to run for elections in four years.

The Americans will learn to talk with a different language about Syria, as soon as the Syrian-Israeli track is launched. The visit by former President Jimmy Carter is not a jump into empty space; neither are his statements about Syria's determination to negotiate. Olmert's statement in his interview with the Israeli daily *Yediot Ahronot*, where he said "there are things I am not willing to discuss now," is also a bit less than a preliminary declaration of readiness to deal realistically with a truth that cannot be denied any more, i.e., it is not possible to jump over Syria.

No Choice for War

There is no choice of going for war. This choice has

become part of the ideological past which had created such terms as "preventive war" and a (Quixotic) war on terrorism. Even on the Iranian side of affairs and the threats of war, the only choice left for a U.S. Administration, which has been transformed from a lame duck to a paralyzed duck, is a solution similar to the Korean one, or the European proposal for international enrichment [of nuclear fuel].

But despite all the indications that there is a possibility of reactivating the Syrian-Israeli track, President Bashar Al-Assad emphasized in his meeting with the Central Committee of the Ba'ath Party that his decision is that resistance and persistence is the strategic option he will be committed to, which means that Syria will not go to negotiations under any conditions made by others, conditions that are meant to weaken Syria, on the basis of achieving peace at the expense of peace, or peace of the status quo, because it has become certain that the Syrian policy of persistence and its results in 2006 are being utilized.

The most outstanding message about Syria's new regional role came through the President's statement that he is keen on preserving the security of the region and its stability, and also his reference to the efforts exerted by Syria to achieve this goal, whether in Iraq, Palestine, or Lebanon, in a way which would ensure the interests of the Arab people. This message means that something like a comprehensive package of regional issues will be in concordance with any serious peaceful climate in the region.

No Secret Talks

No secret talks or negotiations with Israel, no matter what they contain: All that Damascus can do in this context will be declared openly in front of public opinion in Syria, and therefore the tune of the secret meetings which were often used to wreck the image of the Syrian policy, will be stopped once and for all. The likely thing is that the peaceful context has been established already, as was defined by the above-mentioned speech by the President in July 2007:

1. The role played by the third party to establish the preliminary rules of the negotiations.
2. Indirect negotiations through sending a person to the mediating state to outline the rules of the negotiations, without meeting with the Israelis. That will quicken the negotiation process.
3. When Syria feels secure with that, the direct negotiations would begin.

Of course the Syrians will not accept that the negotiations be used for gaining or wasting time, and they prefer to have the American party as a decent partner in these negotiations, which requires a rapid shift by the Americans to the language of realistic politics.

In any case, the only constant is change, and changes have become more dense ... and promising.