

Barak Betrayed Clinton

by Jeffrey Steinberg

In an interview published July 18, 2006 in *Ha'aretz*, Maj. Gen. Uri Sagi (IDF-ret.) called for Israel to negotiate a peace agreement with Syria. Sagi has unique credentials to put forward this idea. After retiring from active-duty military service (he was the head of the IDF Intelligence Corp from 1991-95), Sagi was Israel's chief negotiator with Syria. In late 2000, following the collapse of the Camp David II talks between the United States, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority, Sagi engaged in detailed negotiations with then-Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. At the last moment, then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak backed out of the deal. General Sagi still believes that "Israel missed a rare opportunity," according to *Ha'aretz* reporter Akiva Eldar. "He wants to believe that the day is not far off when the younger Assad will finish the job, and even surpass his father. He is convinced that the key to Israel's long-term security problems lies with Syria; the options of neutralizing the actual Syrian threat, a road to an arrangement with Lebanon, and even opening a window through it to Iran, are all in Syria. He notes that the Iranians in 1991 gave Syria a green light to join the Madrid Conference and promised not to disrupt the negotiations with Barak."

"I don't want people to gather from my remarks that I think that the Syrians are real saints," Sagi explained, "but if you talk to them and convince the Americans to provide them with economic aid and perhaps to gently back off on Assad, regarding the Hariri assassination, Syria, with all its weaknesses, can be a stabilizing force in the region."

Col. Patrick Lang (USA-ret.) wrote on his website on July 17 about Sagi's account of the lost opportunity of 2000. "After his retirement from the IDF, Sagi was Israel's chief negotiator with the Syrians and, in my opinion, came very close to completing a deal with Hafez al-Assad that would have ended the Syrian confrontation with Israel. The elder Assad was very sick at the time. He knew he did not have much time left on earth. He was very concerned about the ultimate fate of his family in the context of American hostility, and continued de facto and de jure states of war with Israel. He knew well that the Saudis hoped and plotted for the day when Sunni Islam would be restored to supremacy in Syria. This obviously threatened the future of Assad dynastic rule in Syria. Syria's semi-alliance with Iran was a poor substitute for the long standing relationship which the country had enjoyed with the Soviet Union, but the Soviet Union was no more. In the end, as Sagi says in this interview, the Americans did not really want the deal, and Barak lacked the courage to go forward with this deal in the absence of American acceptance. Will history be kind and provide 'another bite at that apple?' Who knows?"