

Syria and Israel Wait for A Signal from Washington

by Dean Andromidas

It would only take a positive signal from the Bush Administration to get the Syrian and Israeli governments into a dialogue, if not serious peace negotiations. But, as leading circles in both U.S. political parties know, the state of mind at the White House under the mentally unfit George W. Bush is locked into Dick Cheney's fanatical obsession with war and regime change against the Arab nations identified in his neo-conservatives' war plan, "Clean Break."

Nonetheless, as Lyndon LaRouche identified in his Aug. 14 statement endorsing the idea presented by former Israeli Justice Minister Yossi Beilin for a broad "Madrid II" peace discussion for Southwest Asia, the chance for peace is wide open, if LaRouche's concept of a new Peace of Westphalia is taken up. Nowhere is the opportunity more obvious than in Syria.

Although that signal from Washington has yet to be given, the Syria-Israel debate continues. It is crucial for such a dialogue to begin if the tenuous Israeli-Lebanon ceasefire is to be maintained, and no new escalation of Israeli-Palestinian violence generated.

Assad Makes an Offer

In a widely reported interview in the German weekly *Der Spiegel* (Sept. 25), Syrian President Bashar Assad declared that not only is now the time for a broad peace initiative, but only the United States can make such an initiative a reality. When asked by *Der Spiegel* "Wherein lies the opportunity" for a peace initiative, Assad replied: "First of all, it's clear to everyone that the status quo of war and conflict and instability is no longer acceptable. Now America enters the picture, because only America, because of its weight, can be the main broker for peace in the Middle East. But the Bush Administration is under pressure. It's being accused of not having managed to bring about peace

in six years. This pressure is good. Europe's foreign policy role is also growing. We specifically do not want a special role for the Europeans. We expect them to work together with America to achieve peace, and to do so on the basis of a vision America must develop."

When asked "What is Syria's role?", Assad laid out the crucial role that Syria can play in a solution that must address not only Israeli-Syrian relations but Israel's relations with the Palestinians and Lebanon. "There can be no peace in the Middle East without Syria," Assad said. "The Lebanon and the Palestinian conflicts are inextricably linked with Syria. I have already mentioned the 500,000 Palestinian refugees. Were we to resolve our territorial dispute with Israel over the Golan Heights alone, we wouldn't achieve stability. We would only be taking away the Palestinians' hope and would be turning them from refugees into resistance fighters. This is why Syria is so determined to achieve a comprehensive peaceful solution."

Assad's statement coheres with the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which called for a comprehensive peace in the Middle East, but which is rejected by the neo-cons.

Assad answered a question on the Palestinian refugees carefully, in a way that corresponded to the Arab Peace Initiative: "You would have to talk to the Palestinians about that. What we are talking about now is their return to the Palestinian state—which is something George W. Bush also speaks about. But it raises questions. What sort of state is this after all? A sovereign state or just a few specks of land covering a few square kilometers? Incidentally, I do not believe that the majority of the refugees want to return to Israel. Most of them want to go back to a Palestine within the borders of 1967. The problem is that at the moment Israel is even rejecting this return. This is unacceptable to us."

Commenting on the speech he delivered after the end of

the recent Lebanon war, which the media played up as a war-mongering diatribe, Assad reminded *Der Spiegel*, “In my speech, I used the word “peace” 57 times. And if this speech was bellicose, how should one interpret the fact that Germany sends a submarine to the Israelis every other year?” This last statement is a reference to the fact that Germany will soon supply Israel with two more submarines, that would give it five reportedly capable of carrying Israeli nuclear-tipped Cruise missiles.

As for calling Israel an enemy state, Assad said it was self-evident since “Israel occupies a part of my country—of course Israel is an enemy. . . .”

Asked about Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s verbal attacks on Israel, Assad said, “The statement is so famous because nobody believes any more in Israel’s peaceful intentions. An entire generation is growing up today with the conviction that only strength and war will lead to peace. . . .” But, he added, “I don’t believe in war, I believe in the principle of deterrence. . . . I don’t say that Israel should be wiped off the map. We want to make peace—peace with Israel. . . . But even my personal opinion, my hope for peace, could change one day. And when the hope disappears, then maybe war really is the only solution. . . .” But, “[I]f peace comes, then everything will change. Peace has a lot of strength.”

Only a few days prior to the appearance of Assad’s interview, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mualem said, “The war in Lebanon has created a genuine opportunity for peace and for solving the problems of the region.” Nonetheless, Mualem warned, “I believe the opportunity will not be exploited and will wither, and the dangers in the area will increase.”

Israeli Leaders Respond

Assad’s interview and Mualem’s statement sparked anew the debate on opening talks with Syria that began with the end of the Lebanon War (See *EIR*, Aug. 25, 2006). In response to Mualem, Beilin, chairman of the Israeli Meretz-Yahad Party, called on Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to immediately respond positively: “If Olmert continues to tread the path of blindness and arrogance, this will lead us into another armed conflict. Ignoring Syria’s call to renew negotiations and peace is a political abandonment that I can’t understand.” He called on Labor Party ministers in Olmert’s government to consider Syria’s gesture “before they lose their identities.”

Labor Party member Yuli Tamir, Minister of Education, did respond. She said, “Syria is a key axis among the Middle Eastern countries, and we must launch immediate negotiations with Syria.” She also called for holding a dialogue with the Palestinian Hamas government, saying, “There is no harm in a dialogue also in this area, and we must try to reach an understanding. I am ready to sit with whomever is willing to reach a peace agreement.”

Tamir and Beilin’s statements have been backed by similar calls over recent weeks by Israeli Defense Minister and Labor Party chairman Amir Peretz and Internal Security Min-

ister Avi Dichter. Dichter is not only a former director of the Shin Bet, the Israeli counterintelligence agency, but a leading member of Olmert’s own Kadima party. Defense Minister Amir Peretz, while speaking at the Forum of Leftist Organizations, said that while Assad makes warlike statements, “On the other hand, I believe that the minute conditions are made for talks with Syria, it must be done, because Syria is the key to stability in the Middle East. I hope these conditions are made.”

Opposition from Olmert and Rice

Assad’s appeal fell on the deaf ears of Israeli Prime Minister Olmert. On the same day the Assad interview hit the morning editions of the Israeli dailies, Olmert told the mass circulation daily *Yediot Ahronot*, “The United States is opposed to talks with Syria not because it opposes peace. It doesn’t believe that Syria wants peace. . . .” Olmert added: “I didn’t say Assad is not a partner. At this moment in time . . . I don’t see in him as a partner to steps that could lead to negotiations.” Two days later, at the weekly cabinet meeting, he scolded his ministers who have called for Syrian talks, declaring, “There are no negotiations with Syria. Whoever doesn’t agree doesn’t have to be in the government. . . .”

Assad’s statements were also, in effect, rejected by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. On the day of Assad’s interview, the *Wall Street Journal* published an interview in which she accused Syria of continuing to allow its borders to be used for infiltration of militants into Iraq. She threatened new sanctions.

According to several Israeli political sources, Olmert’s relations with the Bush Administration, especially Cheney, are not nearly as warm as those of his predecessor Ariel Sharon. These sources point to Israel’s failure to “win” the Lebanon war, especially its refusal to attack Syria, as being bitter disappointments for Cheney and the neo-cons.

These same sources point to Likud party chairman and opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu’s intermediary role between Israel and the Bush Administration, especially Cheney and the neo-cons. Olmert felt compelled to meet with Netanyahu prior to the latter’s Sept. 5 meeting with the Vice President in Washington (*EIR*, Sept. 15, 2006). Netanyahu, serving as Cheney’s messenger, was one of the architects of the recent Lebanon war. Ever since the signing of the ceasefire agreement, he has been telling everyone who will listen that Israel has to prepare for the “next round” of war against Hezbollah.

Netanyahu recently met with Transport Minister and leading Kadima party member Shaul Mofaz, at the home of the latter’s private attorney. The discussion reportedly focused on whether Mofaz would lead a split in the Kadima party, and bring himself and nine or ten other Kadima Knesset members back into the Likud. Such a move would make the Likud the largest party, and put Netanyahu back into the Prime Minister’s office—a move which would lead to the “next round” Netanyahu has been promising.