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Don't spurn Syria's overtures

By David Kimche

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On February 14, 1971 the Special Envoy to the Middle East, Gunnar Jarring, flew from Cairo to Israel carrying an official Note from the Egyptian Government. The veteran Swedish diplomat was received by the director-general of the Foreign Ministry, Gideon Rafael, who, when he read the Note, could hardly believe his eyes. The opening sentence began with the following words: "Egypt will be ready to enter into a peace agreement with Israel?"

For the first time in the history of the Israel-Arab conflict those magic words - "peace agreement" - were put on the table by an Arab government. The Egyptians' demand was clear and precise: Israel would have to withdraw to the international border with Egypt in exchange for peace. No mention was made of Palestinian territories in the Note. Egypt wanted to have Sinai returned to it, and was willing to make peace in exchange.

Rafael and his aides hastened to pen Israel's reply: He proposed entering into immediate negotiations, at foreign minister level, to discuss all aspects pertaining to a peace agreement. Foreign minister Abba Eban endorsed Rafael's proposed answer; prime minister Golda Meir did not. When the director-general brought the Egyptian Note and his reply to the prime minister for her approval, she angrily ordered him to add the following sentence to his reply: "Israel will not withdraw to the pre-June 5, 1967 lines."

When the Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, read Israel's reply, he understood that there was no way he could get Sinai back peacefully, and the count-down to the Yom Kippur War began. In the end, we did go back to pre-June 5 lines, just as Sadat had demanded in his Note in 1971, but we did so after we suffered thousands of dead and wounded in a war that would not have happened if our prime minister had not missed the opportunity of making peace with Egypt in 1971. We paid dearly for her obduracy, for her refusal to grasp the hand of peace that was stretched out to us.

Could it be that we are witnessing a repeat performance of that missed opportunity with perhaps even more dire consequences? Can Prime Minister

Olmert's declaration that we shall stay in the Golan Heights "for eternity" in answer to Syria's offer to enter into peace negotiations be compared to the unfortunate sentence that Golda Meir added to our reply to the Egyptians?

The lesson to be learned from Golda Meir's answer to the Egyptians is never to ignore an offer to talk peace with one's adversaries. One can be tough in negotiations, and demand the maximum within reason, but a refusal to meet around the negotiating table will, in all likelihood, mean that one meets on the battlefield instead. That was the case with Egypt in the '70s, and there is every likelihood that this will happen in the future with the Syrians.

One could argue that we have nothing to fear from a war with a "weak" Syria. We made the same argument in July when we rushed into a war with Hizbullah. However, both Syria and Hizbullah are backed by Iran.

Syria, just like Hizbullah in July, has a plentiful supply of missiles and rockets, as well as the same anti-tank missiles that wrought havoc to our forces in July and August. They cannot win a war against us, but nor could Egypt in 1973, yet in the end Sadat did get Sinai back, and eventually, some time in the future, we will give the Golan back in exchange for peace with the Arab world. We should remember that successive prime ministers, including Bibi Netanyahu, were willing to do just that - give the Heights back in exchange for peace. The argument that Netanyahu and Ehud Barak had with the Syrians was not about the Heights, but about the strip of land between the cliffs and the Sea of Galilee.

THIS NEWSPAPER has, correctly and justifiably, underlined the danger that Iran represents for our country. We must do everything possible to lessen that danger. History has proved that our decision to bomb the nuclear installations in Iraq was a correct one. Can we do it again, in Iran? I have no idea if we are capable or not.

I know it will be a thousand times more difficult. In Iraq we were facing one site that had to be destroyed, while in Iran there would be vastly more targets to be attacked. Whether we, or the United States for that matter, can make sure that Iran's nuclear capability can be permanently destroyed by a military strike is something that no journalist in this country knows, not even those who are most vehemently demanding it.

If such a strike can succeed, there may be no alternative but to activate it. There are, however, additional ways to weaken the Iranian hegemony in the Middle East. One way is to lessen Iran's hold on Syria by entering into a dialogue with the Syrians. Even an outside possibility that we could make

peace with Syria - and with the rest of the Arab world as a pre-condition - would justify such a move, which would also ease negotiations with the Palestinians.

Prime minister Menachem Begin understood the strategic importance for Israel of peace with Egypt and was willing to pay the price that Golda Meir refused to pay. The strategic advantages of peace with Syria are self-evident. Peace with the Arab world and with Syria is now more important than ever, in view of the Iranian threat. The price for peace will be heavy and painful, but another missed opportunity of the sort we witnessed in 1971 could be much worse.

The writer is a former director-general of the Foreign Ministry.