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Peace Now



Yariv Oppenheimer

Assad waiting for Ehud

With Mideast more dangerous than ever, Israel must negotiate with Syria

Yariv Oppenheimer

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Failure, obstinacy, diplomatic blindness, fear and arrogance - there are no better words to describe the manner in which the Israeli government is addressing Syria's offer to return to the negotiating table without preconditions. In the not too distant future, the Israeli refusal to talk to the Syrian regime may turn out to be the Olmert government's most tragic mistake, despite the fierce competition for this "title."

Any intelligent person realizes that in the past summer Israel did not only fight in Lebanon and against Hizbullah, but also against Iran and Syria. Although not even one shot was fired at the Syrian-Israeli border across the Golan Heights, in practice Hizbullah used the aid of Damascus, which assisted the group's fighters in transferring equipment and arms from Iran.

Whether we like it or not, we have already paid a heavy price in the last war for the absence of peace with Syria and our control of the Golan.

Now, on the eve of the development of an Iranian nuclear bomb and possible revolution in Lebanon, Syria is again calling on Israel to return to the negotiating table without preconditions in order to reach a peace agreement.

As opposed to Hizbullah and Iran, Syria recognizes Israel's existence and does not call for its annihilation. The Syrian regime constantly notes its desire to regain the Golan Heights, just as Egypt regained the Sinai, and secure peace and normalization with the State of Israel.

Indeed, the many politicians and commentators are correct when they ceaselessly describe Syria as a terror-sponsoring state and talk about Hamas and Hizbullah enjoying the warm home provided by Damascus, and the way Syria continues to serve as the link between Iran and Lebanon. These analyses are accurate, yet their final conclusion – which calls for avoiding dialogue with Syria – is wrong.

More than just hummus in Damascus

Precisely because Syria is such a meaningful factor in the Middle East, there will be no greater blow to Hizbullah and Iran than a peace deal between Israel and Syria. Such agreement would dry up Nasrallah, isolate Tehran, and dramatically boost the regional strategic balance in Israel's favor.

Israel should demand from the Syrians – during negotiations and not as a precondition – to disengage from terror organizations and Iran and cooperate for the sake of regional stability, including in Lebanon.

The demand that the Syrian regime undertake such actions even before talks get underway is not serious and constitutes a mere excuse in order to justify Israel's refusal.

Any sane regime, including the Syrian one, will not initiate a clash with radical elements within its own country before the talks start and before their results become clear. There is no reason for Syria to change its policy towards Israel before the government in Jerusalem accepts the request to return to the negotiating table.

Even if the Syrians do not have serious intentions to take a new path, this can only be determined after negotiations are launched and the seriousness of both parties can be examined.

Today of all times, when the Middle East is becoming a more dangerous place than ever and when the Iranian threat is becoming more substantial with every passing day, while radical Islamic elements are on the rise – at this time the Israeli government must exhaust every possibility for peace and normalization, and check out with all seriousness Syria's intentions regarding an agreement.

The implication of such agreement is not summed up with the ability to eat Hummus in Damascus. Peace with Syria is first and foremost a strategic-existential need meant to isolate Iran and radical Islam, pave the way for a peace agreement with Lebanon and other Arab countries, and guarantee Israel's survival in the Middle East.

The writer is Peace Now's director general