

August 9, 2007

MR. PRIME MINISTER, DO NOT ABANDON THE GOLAN

Whatever one may say about the Syrian President Bashar Assad he does not beat about the bush. In his recent speech in parliament he made it clear that peace with Israel is not his immediate concern. In evident response to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's offer to give him the Golan in exchange for peace, his haughty reply was that the Golan must be returned to Syria free, gratis and for nothing.

Then, with that achieved, he might, or he might not, be prepared to talk. This of course is in tune with the Pan-Arab policy of 'phases' in the projected destruction of Israel. It was first propounded by president Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia in the 1950s, well before the Six Day War when Israel was locked into the 9-mile wide boundary of the 1949 Armistice Agreement. In more recent years, it became the mantra of the moderate Arab who will tell you gently over a cup of coffee, that a Palestinian state in the 'occupied' territories will of course be only an interim step before they take the rest of the land.

Arafat consecrated this idea as the core of Arab strategy: take what you can, by diplomacy, by war, by whatever, and that will serve as a base for the next phase. Assad is doing no more than recalling this principle and reminding us once more that handing over territory to the Arabs has never brought and will never bring peace. It would only accelerate and facilitate the coming of the final assault on the Jewish state.

IN ANNOUNCING his willingness to hand over the Golan to Syria, Olmert defies the national interest. It was only after Syria had launched three wars and one terror campaign against Israel that the Israeli government decided to incorporate the Golan into the state. Implementation of Olmert's proposal would not only be a severe blow to Israeli security, but would undermine Israel's right, as a victim of that repeated aggression, to take and keep the Golan. Here is a most relevant precedent: In World War II Nazi Germany's armies had penetrated deep into Soviet Russia as far as Stalingrad; and there began their long retreat. The Soviets reconquered the ravaged territory, and in the British House of Commons in February 1944 Prime Minister Winston Churchill, when asked what would be the future of the territories now in the hands of Britain's Soviet allies, he replied: 'Twice in our lifetime Russia has been violently assaulted. Many millions of Russians have been slain and vast tracts of Russian soil devastated as a result of repeated German aggression. Russia has the right of reassurance against future attacks from the West, and we are going all the way with her to see that she gets it.' (The Soviets retained the territory. A part of it was originally Poland, and for that the Poles were subsequently compensated by territory from Germany).

What more precise historic parallel for Israel could Olmert need? Should he need parallels at all?

HERE IS a record of Syria's three aggressions. No more than three years after the Syrians gained their own independence from French trusteeship, Syria in 1948 freely entered into the alliance with six other members of the Arab League to prevent by force of war the birth of the State of Israel. The towering Golan Heights were a first-class natural base for Syria's onslaught. This was in 1948.

Miraculously, Israel survived against tremendous odds and suffering heavy casualties, but Syria retained the Golan; and then during the following 19 years, despite the armistice of 1949, playfully used the Heights as a launching-pad for lobbing shells down onto the Galilee.

It is a part of Israeli folklore that in those 19 years children in Galilee did much of their schooling in underground bunkers for protection from those shells. Partaking as targets for those attacks were also the fishermen of the Lake of Galilee.

Then in 1967, in company with Egypt and Jordan, Syria joined in a new assault on Israel. This was advertised well in advance, by Egyptian president Nasser, to be a 'war of annihilation.' Heavily buttressed, the Golan naturally played its part in the attack. This time however, Israel decisively won the war and was able to say 'enough is enough.' This time the Israeli Defense Force climbed and captured the Heights.

Israel, however, was given little respite. Six years later, and that on Yom Kippur, Syria, again in company with Egypt, made war on Israel. In hard fighting Syria failed to win back the Golan Heights and, indeed, lost an additional slice of territory to the east. Negotiations followed and, under pressure from US secretary of state Henry Kissinger, Israel returned that slice, and a border was delineated between Israel and Syria. That border, incidentally with Damascus in its sights, has ever since 1974 assured Israel of peaceful relations, such as they are, with Syria. That border emphasizes the truth, for which a heavy price in blood has been paid, that only with the Golan in Israel's hands can peace be maintained. (In Europe, 60 years after Germany was defeated, has anybody dared, would anybody dare, to suggest that Polish territory be returned to Germany?)

IT IS not irrelevant to add that the Golan was never before a 'Syrian' territory. It was historically Jewish, northern Galilee. It has a special history. It housed a thriving Jewish community for perhaps three centuries after the destruction of the Temple and contains many Talmudic memories.

It was naturally originally included in the territory of the British Mandate of 1922 for establishing the Jewish National Home in Palestine. In a very dubious 'deal' with France in 1923, Britain was given lands from the Mosul area in France's mandated territory of Syria. These lands were 'moved' on the map into the British mandated territory of Iraq. In return Britain rewarded France with 25% of her oil interests in Iraq - with the Jewish Golan as a bonus.

But beyond those external implications however far-reaching, Olmert's irresponsible proposal to reward Syria by giving it the Golan must be placed in a yet wider context, high in the scale of blunders committed and disasters generated by the prime minister in the past two years - first as adjunct to his mentor Ariel Sharon and then on his own account.

They are inexplicably linked one to the other, from the Gaza 'disengagement' which was about to usher in the age of peace (remember Olmert's messianic promise of such a 'new morning' to a New York audience) down to the relaxed unpreparedness and then the amateurish handling of the Second Lebanon War.

Thus one is able to reach an understanding of the state of disorientation in the nation. That is where Israel is today.

IMMEDIATELY striking in this latest stage is the fact that neither in Olmert's Golan proposal, nor in the supporting acclaim of his supporters in the media, has there

been mention, not a hint, that giving up the Golan to Syria would involve the expulsion from their homes of some 20,000 women and children.

One must assume from Olmert's callous behavior toward the expellees of Gush Katif, and since their expulsion, that he believes that the success of the operation at Gush Katif would be repeated on the Golan, that he will give the order to the army, and they will do the job. A few protests, a little violence here and there and nothing more.

He should be warned. He is dead wrong. The 20,000 will not 'go quietly.' There will be many more 'Ya'alons' in the army to oppose such an evil move. Many, many more soldiers will refuse to accept the role of bullying the people into the victimhood of expulsion. Too many of the people bulldozed into supporting the Gaza adventure have realized how mistaken they were.

It is most unlikely that Olmert will succeed. Even the financial cost of such an operation, which must amount to tens of billions would be prohibitive. Who would pay the cost? The Israeli taxpayer? The US? Not a chance.

Nevertheless, even if only as a protection of Israel's self-respect as a sane nation, Olmert should be pressed, especially by the people who cheered him on in Gaza, not to try again. It is they who should be the first to tell him 'hands off the Golan!'