

Failure of Syria-Israel talks may mean war

by Dean Andromidas

Whether the summit conference between President Bill Clinton and Syrian President Hafez Assad was a failure, or just another disappointment on the road of hard bargaining for one of the world's most important peace agreements, is irrelevant, because the region continues to be vectored toward war.

It is widely believed that the two-and-a-half-hour summit conference failed to produce results, because of disagreement between Israel and Syria over demarcating their border along the "June 4th lines" of 1967. This line runs along the east bank of the Sea of Galilee, which lies at the bottom of the western face of the Golan Heights. The Sea of Galilee, (also known as Lake Kinneret or Lake Tiberias), is the largest source of freshwater in the region, and accounts for 40% of Israel's water resources. Press reports and sources close to Syrian and Israeli negotiators pointed out that Assad held to the position that the border lies at the bank of the Sea of Galilee, which it controlled until it was captured by Israel in the June 1967 war. Assad also wants access to the lake, which it also had until the war. Israel's position is that it will retain full sovereignty over the lake, while extending the eastern border several hundred meters in order to control the road that encircles it.

While the press has painted President Assad as "intransigent," the reality is, that "inside the box" of the Israeli-Syrian dispute, these few hundred meters have been at the center of the 50 years of conflict since the first Arab-Israeli war.

An Israeli military source said, "Listen, the differences are out in the open for everyone to see, but the point is, as long as nothing is offered 'outside the box,' why should Assad compromise?"

Indeed, since the Syrian-Israeli talks were suspended last January, and despite secret talks and the "good offices" of Washington, nothing was offered "outside the box." In the Jan. 14 *EIR*, we reported on the opening of the January talks, pointing out the absolute necessity for the United States to drop its radical free-market and globalization economic policies, and instead sponsor a regional economic development package, including massive development of new water resources in the region through desalination and other water development projects. It is only through such

a package that the political and territorial differences can be bridged.

We also detailed that at the heart of the territorial issues, is water. Israel went to war in 1967 in order to gain control over the entire Jordan River watershed, of which the Sea of Galilee is an integral part. As it stands now, nothing has been brought to the negotiations which will bridge the gap between Israel's demand for absolute control, and Syria's demand to regain the access it once had to these water resources.

Kissinger mobilizes in Washington

One reason why Clinton came to the talks empty-handed, is that there has been a mobilization in Washington against a U.S. commitment to underwrite a multibillion-dollar aid program, not only for Syria, but for Israel as well. According to Israeli press reports, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and other Washington players, including senior members of the American Jewish lobby, have been advising the Israeli government not to come to an agreement with Syria now, but rather to wait until President Assad has left the scene and is replaced by his son, Bashar. Which is to say, put off the issue until after either Bush or Gore, neither a friend of Middle East peace, is putatively elected President of the United States.

This pressure was so intense, that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak did not submit a request for aid to finance the withdrawal of Israeli civilian settlements from the Golan Heights.

The destabilization of Barak

And, as *EIR* has been reporting, the most dramatic development in the past two months has been the destabilization of the Barak government. Key pro-peace figures have been targetted with political scandals and criminal investigations since the January suspension of the Syria-Israel talks. The list is impressive. At the end of January, Israeli President Ezer Weizman, in the middle of a personal mobilization in support of a peace treaty with Syria, was hit was the so-called "cash gifts" scandal (*EIR*, Feb. 4). Two weeks later, Barak and his "One Israel" electoral coalition became the target of a criminal investigation for alleged violations of the election campaign finance law (*EIR*, Feb. 11). A few weeks later, Barak's Transport Minister and key political ally, Yitzhak Mordechai, was forced to take a leave of absence from the government because of an impending criminal investigation for allegedly sexually assaulting an employee of the Transport Ministry (*EIR*, March 17). Mordechai's Center Party, which was instrumental in defeating Netanyahu's reelection bid, has also become a target of investigation for allegedly violating the election campaign finance law.

Several coalition partners in Barak's government have also threatened to bolt from the coalition if Barak signs a

peace agreement with Syria. Three of these partners, the Shas, the National Religious Party, and Yisrael B'Aliyah, support a referendum which, if approved, would make it impossible for the government to win a referendum in support of a peace treaty with Syria. In addition, Shas, the third-largest party in the Knesset (Parliament), is threatening to support a bill for early elections, sponsored by the opposition Likud party.

One Middle East observer commented, "With all these internal problems, it seems Israel, at the moment, is not interested in peace agreements."

Some political observers have compared the situation to the British-instigated "Clean Hands" scandals in Italy, which led to the decomposition of the traditional political parties and structures. But in the Middle East, the disintegration of regimes often leads to war.

This type of destabilization prevents Barak from seeing himself as politically capable of making decisive moves, especially if he is viewed as making "concessions."

Without Syria, all other agreements are off

According to a leading Israeli security expert, talks with Syria are "on hold without much prospect for resumption." Therefore, the Barak government will concentrate on its stated intention of withdrawing from its self-defined security zone in southern Lebanon by July, and coming to an agreement with the Palestinians. But, these issues cannot be dealt with separately from a peace agreement with Syria. The security zone is simply an extension into Lebanon of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Moreover, Syria maintains a preeminent position in Lebanon, with more than 30,000 troops stationed there, ruling out a separate Israeli peace with Lebanon.

Hypothetically, even if the Syrian presence were removed, a separate agreement with Israel would not be possible. A withdrawal to the so-called "international border," means little given that 60% of the border is in dispute.

It is not clear whether Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shi'ite political and guerrilla movement currently resisting the Israeli occupation, will forgo attacks on Israeli territory proper.

Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, without a peace agreement, according to the source, means a change in the rules of engagement, whereby Syrian military positions inside Lebanon, and even Syria, will no longer be off-limits to Israel. Even this source could not rule out a "worst-case scenario," of a war between Syria and Israel, including an exchange of missiles.

In the United States, the *New York Times* has rung the alarm bells about the gravity of the war threat. In its March 30 lead editorial, "After the Syrian Setback," the *Times* was remarkably blunt: "Some Israelis fear that if there is no negotiating breakthrough with Syria by the time of Israel's planned withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas, with the approval of Damascus, will

move their rocket launchers to the border and shell northern Israeli villages. Israel would probably retaliate with air strikes against Lebanese power stations and other targets. If the rocket attacks persisted, Israel might consider air strikes against Syria itself. Even the remote possibility of such a development underscores the danger of continued stalemate."

The *Times* went on to call for cool-headed behavior by both Israel and Syria, and for progress on a durable Middle East peace. The *Times* noted that the progress being made on the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiation front is bodes well for averting a disaster.

Circles in Israel and in the U.S. State Department have been advising Israel to concentrate on a final agreement with the Palestinians. But, it is foolish to think that this could be completed prior to a peace agreement with Syria, and with Lebanon, even more so.

The Palestinian refugees

Territory is not the only issue; there is the much-ignored question of Palestinian refugees, 1-3 million of whom are still living in refugee camps that have existed since the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948, more than 50 years ago. These camps exist in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, while hundreds of thousands of stateless Palestinians live throughout the Middle East, including in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. Anywhere between 500,000 to 1 million of these refugees are in Lebanon, most of them living an impoverished existence in refugee camps. Unable to become citizens of Lebanon, they are prevented from finding legitimate employment. Since many come from areas which are now part of Israel, their status is one of the last questions to be decided under the Oslo Agreements between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

This is not simply a Palestinian issue, but a regional one, particularly true for Lebanon. In 1982, then-Israeli Defense Minister Gen. Ariel Sharon (bitterly referred to as the "Butcher of Lebanon"), used the presence of the Palestine Liberation Organization as the pretext to invade. Centers of gruelling poverty and disenchantment with the peace process, these camps are a flashpoint for war. It is already feared that terrorist groups, tied to neither Syria, Iran, nor the PLO, will launch provocations. It is known that groups linked to the London-controlled Osama bin Laden, many of whose members are not Palestinian, but rather, veterans of the 1980s Afghanistan War, are operating out of the camps and other areas in Lebanon. Security operations have been carried out against them by both the Lebanese and Syrian security services. Most immediately, they form an internal security problem for Lebanon, whose delicate ethnic balance among Christian Maronites, Sunni Muslims, and Shi'ite Muslims could be seriously destabilized. The last time this balance was upset, the country was thrown into a civil war that lasted for almost two decades.