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LFI: Memorandum

Syria First:
does the road to peace
go through Damascus?

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Introduction: the end of unilateralism

By now it seems clear that Israeli unilateralism is over. The primary reason for this is that Israeli unilateral withdrawals, notably from the Gaza Strip in August 2005 and from Southern Lebanon in May 2000, have been perceived by terrorist groups as a sign of weakness. In Southern Lebanon Hezbollah seized control and in Gaza the evacuated areas have been used to shell Israeli communities with Kassam rockets. This development has made it impossible for the current Israeli government of Ehud Olmert to persuade a sceptical Israeli public to agree to further unilateral disengagements from West Bank areas, as the government could not possibly guarantee that the Palestinian militants will not use the evacuated areas to send rockets into Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, or even Israel's Ben Gurion international airport.

The end of unilateralism means that if Israel seeks to draw her future permanent borders – and the current government came to power on this ticket - she will have to return to diplomacy and negotiate with the other side rather than imposing a unilateral solution on it. However currently there is no one to talk to amongst the Palestinians who are mired in factional violence and political stagnation.

This article suggests that with the current chaos in the Palestinian camp, and negotiations with the Palestinians on hold, a means of giving the Middle East Peace Process a new momentum is for Israel to turn its attention to resuming peace talks with Syria. Britain has a role to play to try and

persuade Washington to soften its approach towards Syria and encourage the Israeli government to resume talks with Damascus which has recently displayed signs of willingness to increase cooperation with Israel and the West. This in turn, is likely to give some momentum to Israeli-Palestinian talks as well.

No Palestinian partner at the moment

Since the militant Palestinian group Hamas won power from Fatah in the January 2006 election, tensions between the two movements have deepened, sliding into direct clashes after talks on setting up a national unity government reached an impasse over Hamas' refusal to recognise Israel and respect previous agreements signed with her. The power struggle being playing out, particularly in the Gaza Strip but also in other Palestinian controlled areas, marks the worst internal Palestinian violence for over a decade.

Chairman of the PA, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) is trying to get a grip on the chaotic situation. He recently said: "there is a responsibility on us to set up a Palestinian government that will enjoy international recognition, will enable the embargo against our people to be lifted and will concentrate on the central task, which is to end the occupation and establish an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital, a state that will live in peace with Israel". The international community has withheld funding to the Hamas led PA and therefore the Hamas government has failed to pay salaries to civil servants, provide food or fulfill the basic functions of government. They have also failed to stop the barrage of Kassam rockets being fired from the strip into Israel. Abu Mazen recently made a series of statements among them that "Bread is more

important than democracy”, by which he seems to indicate that while indeed the Hamas government came to power through democratic elections, its inability, as a result of its political position, to provide the most basic services to the Palestinian people means that it should go.

As an alternative to the Hamas government, Abu Mazen initially suggested setting up a government of technocrats with which the international community could feel more comfortable to cooperate. However, this was rejected by Hamas as was the setting up a government of national unity despite arduous efforts to negotiate an agreement. Should Abu Mazen try to impose his will on Hamas, this might well lead to further escalation of factional violence in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Abu Mazen is now calling for new Palestinian Parliamentary and Presidential elections as a means of ending the factional deadlock and fighting.

Even if Abu Mazen succeeds in dispersing the current ineffective Hamas government and come up with an alternative executive, it seems that factional chaos and rocket attacks are likely to go on for some time in Palestinian controlled areas, mainly in the Gaza Strip, thus limiting the chance for renewing serious Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Israel, however, does not have the luxury of not seeking – energetically - peace with her neighbours because the window of opportunity for peace-making is closing fast. Should Iran, for instance, arm herself with nuclear weapons, this will certainly put an abrupt end to Arab-Israeli peace talks, as no Israeli Prime Minister will have the public support to give up land and compromise with her Palestinians and Arab neighbours, at a time when Israel is considered to be facing an existential threat. Moreover if Israel could find peace with her neighbours, the power and threat of Iran would be undermined.

Syria First

The ‘Syria First’ approach is becoming a central political debate in Israel and is by no means a new idea. Former Israeli Prime Ministers from the late Yitzhak Rabin, through Shimon Peres, to Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, were all devotees of a Syria-first approach, preferring a peace deal with Damascus before one with the Palestinians. “Our dispute with Syria”, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak once said, “is simpler to sort out than the Palestinian [because] on the Golan Heights there is no Temple Mount”. During his tenure as Prime Minister from 1999 to 2001, Barak also regarded the signing of peace treaty with Syria as a useful tool to force the Palestinians to play ball and turn more flexible and cooperative in peace talks. As he put it in an interview, “Settling with Syria first would isolate the Palestinians and make them less inclined to stick to hardline positions”. While Barak and his predecessors tried to strike peace with Syria, offering to return the Golan Heights, former President Hafez Assad was less than flexible, refusing to meet Israel’s security needs and, despite efforts, no deal was reached.

However a great deal has changed since Barak’s premiership. The end of Syria’s hold over Lebanon and her withdrawal from there under intense international pressure undermined its prestige and ability to manoeuvre politically vis-à-vis Israel; loosing Lebanon also hurt Syria economically. Additionally, the collapse of Iraq has strengthened Iran whose fundamentalist worldview is contrary to the secular inclination of the Syrian regime. Young Bashar Assad knows that the only way to stabilise his shaky regime, move his poor country forward, and put the lid on growing Iranian influence is by striking a deal with Israel; this will also move him closer to Washington.

He recently told the BBC that Syria was prepared to resume peace negotiations with Israel. Shimon Peres, Israel's vice premier responded with a public invitation to Assad to "come to Jerusalem" and prove his good intentions as did President Anwar Sadat of Egypt on his 1977 visit to Israel. President Sadat of Egypt, however, only accepted Menachem Begin's invitation to come to Jerusalem once he knew that the Sinai desert would definitely be returned to Egypt. To the BBC's question as to whether Israel and Syria could live side by side in peace, Assad responded with a "Yes".

From Israel's perspective peace with Syria would not only resolve the stalemate with the Palestinians but also break up the 'arc of extremism' curving through the region. The crescent from Tehran, through Damascus, to Hezbollah and Hamas is most easily disrupted by negotiations with Syria, the only non Shia, secular, element of the arc.

Conclusions

For peace negotiations between Israel and Syria to resume, the Bush administration

must be willing to throw its weight behind such an initiative and the UK government with others can be influential in nudging Washington in this direction. The White House is legitimately anxious about giving Syria the green light due to its continuing concerns over Syria's porous border with Iraq, aiding the safe passage of insurgents in and out of the country. However Washington could be encouraged to seek a way of diplomatically dealing with these issues as a way of slowly ending Syria's isolation.

The mere resumption of Israeli-Syrian talks has the potential to encourage the Palestinians to do the same. If the Hamas and Palestinians Islamic Jihad political leadership was no longer welcome in Damascus, and links with Hezbollah were severed, the 'armed resistance' movement within the Palestinian territories would suffer a serious blow, creating room for the moderates to dominate the political agenda.

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