

The Third Option

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I recently returned from a trip to Israel with 17 law enforcement leaders. We visited the Golan Heights and as with many delegations before them, all members were vehemently opposed to relinquishing the Golan to Syria under any circumstances. In a Jerusalem briefing, following the visit to the Heights two options were presented: 1) Peace without the Golan; 2) the Golan without Peace. This simplistic dichotomy is highly problematic because it ignores other options and because it rests on faulty understandings.

Peace without the Golan: The Syrian mantra has been for years that the Golan is Syrian and therefore it should be under Syrian rule. In fact, it is a precondition for any "peace" negotiations without which the Syrians say there is nothing to discuss. One could ask a Syrian - as I did back in 1974 - what will happen if the Golan will be again in Syrian hands. Will there be peace then? That Syrian said that there will be peace with Syria but now Israel will "have to take care of its (Syria's) Palestinian brothers." To my question of whether this entails changing Israel's zip code into that of the Mediterranean Sea his response was "that is your problem." The Syrian government may be more eloquent than a foreign Syrian graduate student in the U.S. but that is essential the Syrian position: "give us the Golan or we will take it by force. Then we will see about relations." Thus, for Israel that is a suicidal deal given that the Syrian had the Golan in 1967, went to war, lost the Golan and tried to regain it in 1973 and lost it again. Of course, in Syria's mind, "Greater Syria" entails not only the Golan but also Lebanon and Israel.

One can understand the Syrian position. If Egypt got all of the Sinai why should Syria be satisfied with anything less? First, not all of the Golan is Syrian. It occupied territories that were Israeli: the southern demilitarized zone at al-Hamma, the Banias area, and the strip of coastal territory along the northeast shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. But what is more worrying is the Israeli "understanding" that the Golan has to be "returned" to Syria if there is to be "peace" between the two countries. Even die-hard Israeli optimists define it as "real peace," a definition clearly perceived very differently by Syria. But the concept of "returning" something that the Syrians had for less than half of the time period that Israel has it is fundamentally flawed. The Golan was Syrian for only 19 years and it was a threatening army post. One does not need to visit Gamla to find out that Jews inhabited the Golan 2000 years ago. At the very least the term "return" should not be used. Give up, give away are more apt terms than adopting the Syrian narrative. Israel has already "gave" in Gaza under the 2006 disengagement and with devastating consequences.

Under this premise it is understood that Israel wants peace and is willing to give the Golan for it. Rabin, Barak, Netanyahu, and Sharon and now Olmert have adopted this point (in various formats) so this understanding is deeply rooted irrespective of the ruling party. What this understanding ignores is the extent to which Syria wants peace. What is clear is that Syria wants

the Golan and Israel wants peace. This tradeoff is far more risky than an unsecured loan. Life and country are at stake.

Golan without peace: The working assumption in Israel is that if Syria wants the Golan and will not have it Syria will not "give" peace to Israel. Why? The Syrians said so. Repeatedly. Thus if Syria wants the Golan and Israel understands that it has to "give" the Golan what other option is there if Israel accepts the Syrian narrative?

Perhaps this late in the game it is not easy to change the rules or the mindset but it is absolutely imperative to do so. The notion of territory for peace is absolutely flawed - and that includes the deal with Egypt - because for Israel it is non-reversible. The disengagement was based on a premise that if Israel leaves Gaza (settlers and soldiers alike) there will be no reason to shoot at Israel and if shots will be fired Israel can "take care of that." Well, thousands of rockets and mortars later it turns out that Israel cannot "take care of that." Given that Hamas is now Iran's front on Israel's southwest, Hizballah in the North (and Hamas and Fatah pose an increasing threat from the East, namely the West Bank) relinquishing the Golan to Syria will ensure the complete contiguous encircling of Israel by Iranian proxies.

The Third Option: With the bankruptcy of the notion of territories for peace and with a seemingly one (Golan) standing in the way of the other (peace) what is left? The third option is to an inversion of the process. Start with peace first. A negotiated peace could take place within five minutes of a meeting if both sides agree to non-belligerence that will lead to a signed peace accord. That is if both sides really want peace. If that is not the case then why come to the table to begin with? If Syria wants the Golan for vague promises that may not have any substance that means it is NOT interested in peace but it wants the Golan. The fact that Syria oscillates between indirect negotiations to threats of taking the Golan by force (as early as next year) is proof positive that peace is not even a secondary goal for Syria. Under these circumstances the mere concept of peace is more evasive than ever.

The third option puts it all on the table. Let's start with a peace accord to be followed by discussion (mediated or direct) on international arrangements about borders, trade relations, cultural relations and the like. Within these negotiations, under no condition should the Golan be given to Syrian rule nor should the Golan residents be uprooted. The Golan constitutes less than 1% of Syria and it could do very well without the Golan. It could do even better with some agreement that will give the area a real semblance of peace.

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