

Tensions worsen between Israel and Syria

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Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's foreign minister from the far-right Israel Beiteinu, last week directly threatened President Bashar Assad that in the event of war Syria would be defeated and his regime would collapse.

Lieberman, speaking last week at a business conference at Bar-Ilan University, said, "Assad should know that if he attacks, he will not only lose the war. Neither he nor his family will remain in power." He continued, "Our message should be that if Assad's father lost a war but remained in power, the son should know that an attack would cost him his regime."

He also said that Damascus could forget any hope of regaining the Golan Heights, which Israel took in the 1976 war, adding, "Whoever thinks territorial concessions will disconnect Syria from the axis of evil is mistaken.... We must make Syria recognize that just as it relinquished its dream of a greater Syria that controls Lebanon ... that it will have to relinquish its ultimate demand regarding the Golan Heights."

Lieberman's belligerent statements are of a piece with his previous declarations that Israeli-Arab legislators who meet Palestinian militants should be executed and that the president of Egypt could "go to hell." His remarks follow weeks of escalating tensions between Israel, Lebanon and Syria and in direct response to Assad stating that Israel was pushing the Middle East toward a new war.

Last Tuesday, Israeli Premier Binyamin Netanyahu accused Lebanon of allowing Hezbollah to increase its stockpile of weapons from 14,000 rockets in 2006 to some 40,000 capable of reaching towns and cities in southern Israel in violation of UN Security Council resolution 1701, which ended the 33-day war between Israel and Lebanon in 2006. Anti-Israel demonstrations are expected in Lebanon to mark the second anniversary of the death of Hezbollah's Imad Mughniyeh, widely assumed to have been assassinated

by Israel.

Last month, Yossi Peled, an Israeli minister without portfolio and a reserve army general, warned that Israel was heading towards a new war with Hezbollah. "We are heading toward a new confrontation in the north, but I don't know when it will happen, just as we did not know when the second Lebanon war would erupt," Peled told Israeli radio.

Israeli troops have been deployed along Israel's northern border, with hints of a military operation in Lebanon in May.

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, no friend of Hezbollah, has voiced his fear of another "Israeli intervention" and strengthened relations with Syria, his erstwhile foe. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said the next war would "change the face of the region."

Syria has indicated that a conflict in south Lebanon could lead to war with Syria, saying that Damascus considered any threat to Lebanon's security and stability as a threat to its own security and that it would respond if Lebanon were attacked. On Wednesday, Walid Moallem, the Syrian foreign minister, speaking at a press conference in Damascus with the Spanish foreign minister Miguel Angel Moratinos, said that Israel "was planting the seeds of the war atmosphere" by threatening attacks on Iran, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. "I tell them [Israel], stop acting like thugs."

Moallem went further, saying, "Do not test the resolve of Syria. You Israelis, you know that war at this time will reach your cities. If such a war breaks out ... it will indeed be total war, whether it begins in south Lebanon or Syria."

Assad accused Israel of pushing the Middle East into a new war, saying, "All the facts point that Israel is driving the region toward war, not peace. Israel is not serious about wanting peace."

Lieberman's response marks a significant shift from the official Israeli position that it will return the Golan

Heights in return for a full peace treaty with Syria. In effect, he ruled out the possibility of any lasting peace with Syria. His comments also broke with the defence establishment's convention of saying nothing to either annoy or humiliate Assad.

The US State Department is keen for Israel to reach some kind of a deal with Syria, as part of its wider project of isolating Tehran in order to secure its own domination in the region. To this end, Washington and Tel Aviv have exerted constant pressure on Damascus, which has long been on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terror.

Syria is equally anxious to break out of its diplomatic and economic isolation and secure new markets and investment from Turkey and Europe, and has received an unprecedented number of diplomatic visits from the US, Europe, Turkey and Lebanon. Assad has now agreed to renew intelligence assistance to the US and Britain. He has also jailed two Syrians for attempting to smuggle arms into Iraq, stepped up security along the long border with Iraq and arrested hundreds of alleged insurgents in an attempt to placate Washington.

George Mitchell, the US special envoy to the Middle East who is on his third visit to Syria, said that Syria and Lebanon were key to achieving peace in the Middle East. "Syria certainly has an important role to play in all these efforts, as do the US and international community," he said after a meeting with Assad.

The Obama administration has just appointed a new ambassador to Damascus, after a break of five years following the assassination of the former prime minister of Lebanon, Rafiq Hariri, which Washington blamed on Syria. The *New York Times* went so far as to place Damascus seventh in its list of recommended tourist sites for 2010 and speculated over whether it would become the "new Marrakesh."

While Netanyahu has been noticeably cool on reaching a deal with Syria, he was forced to step in and say that he was willing to talk to Damascus "without preconditions." He instructed Zvi Hauser, the cabinet secretary, to phone all the ministers and request that they refrain from commenting on Syria in the media in an effort to calm the situation.

Two days earlier, Ehud Barak, Israel's defence minister, who has been pushing for a peace deal with Syria, addressed a group of senior Israeli officers and called for a resumption of talks with Damascus because

war was likely to break out otherwise. He then said, "Immediately after such a war, we'll sit down to negotiate and discuss exactly the same things we've been discussing with the Syrians for 15 years already."

Damascus interpreted that as an ultimatum.

There are pronounced divisions within Israeli ruling circles about what course of action to take regarding Syria.

Barak and the defence establishment calculate that a deal with Syria would drive a wedge between Syria and its allies—Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza—which would make the return of the Golan Heights, now home to 20,000 Israelis living in 30 agricultural towns and settlements, a price worth paying.

Alternatively, with its military supremacy—Syria does not really have an air force, its artillery and armoured corps are outdated and its air defence systems ineffective as Israel's strike in September 2007 demonstrated—should war break out Israel would be able to inflict major damage on Syria, including both its military, public and political infrastructure. This would, as Lieberman said, mean the end of the Assad presidency.

Barak also believes that the chances of reaching a deal with Syria are fairly high. Moratinos said he thought that Assad was serious about wanting peace and was willing to disengage his country from Iran and Hezbollah, and offered to mediate between Israel and Turkey so that Ankara could resume its role of peace broker between Tel Aviv and Damascus. Turkey acted as mediator in the four back-channel talks with Damascus conducted by Ehud Olmert, the former Israeli prime minister.

While Barak is presented as the voice of reason in contrast to Lieberman, Netanyahu uses the two in tandem as a good cop-bad cop team to browbeat Syria into submission on Israel's terms, backed up with the threat of military force.



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