

Analysis: Can Israel afford to live without the Golan?

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Confirming reports in the Arab media that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert would be willing to withdraw from the Golan Heights in return for peace, Syrian President Bashar Assad told the Qatari daily *Al-Watan* on Thursday that he had received such a message from the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan regarding the Israeli stance, in exchange for peace with Syria.

It has been known for years, ever since Israel captured the Golan in the Six Day War, that negotiations with Syria would hinge on the picturesque highland. But the Golan now is home to moshavim, kibbutzim, wineries and more than 20,000 Israeli citizens. It is also deemed to be of considerable strategic importance, and its control is a much-coveted regional asset.

While peace with Syria, in theory, might outweigh or even neutralize the strategic need for an Israeli presence in the Golan, what exactly would that peace look like? It could be argued that a shift in the region would cool the tensions of past months and years in the north.

Israel's demands include Syria's cutting all ties with terrorist groups including Palestinian organizations headquartered in Damascus. But one question, which remains to be answered, seems to be the central one: Can Israel afford to give up the Golan Heights?

"We lived here for years without it," says Prof. Martin van Creveld of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who is Israel's most prominent military historian. He believes that retaining the Golan is not essential to Israel's survival.

"Under modern conditions, especially with the technological advances in the military, topography is less important than it used to be. With the advent of precision-guided munitions, you no longer need to be 'up there' to hit them 'down there,'" he says. "Technology has developed in such a way to favor the defender very much.

"We should always assume, of course, that the IDF is a fighting machine, and not the cowardly bunch we saw over the summer of 2006," Van Creveld continues. "If they are, everything is lost anyway."

He goes as far as to say that the IDF would have the advantage from below in fighting a Syrian army advancing from the Golan Heights.

"If I could think of a good way to commit suicide," he says, "it would be to command a Syrian tank division down from the Golan Heights."

However, others in the military establishment aren't worried about the Syrian army attacking.

"It's guerrilla warfare I'm concerned about," says former Military Intelligence chief Maj.-Gen. (ret.) Aharon Ze'evi Farkash. And he isn't necessarily referring to guerrillas sponsored by the Assad government.

"There are a lot of issues within Syria that need to be taken into consideration when discussing this option," Farkash says. "I'm not saying that I'm for or against [giving up the Golan], but I will say that

Syria's internal politics play a large role."

Farkash believes that because Assad is a member of the minority Alawite sect, his control of Syria is shaky, as was the case for his father, whom he succeeded. Islamists within Syria would like to see him overthrown, and consider him, as an Alawite, unfit to rule.

"In the early 1980s, Hafez Assad led a military campaign against Sunni militants in Syria, killing tens of thousands of his own people," Farkash explains. "This situation was never completely resolved, and along with the global rise of al-Qaida in 2001 and 2002, Wahabism [an extremist form of Sunni Islam] from Saudi Arabia has been making its way into Syria. Assad could suddenly lose power to Wahabi extremists or other Sunni factions, especially if he makes peace with Israel."

With the Alawite-Shi'ite connection becoming closer, as is apparent from Syria's growing ties with Iran, a predominately Shi'ite nation, Farkash explains that Assad is considered by the Sunnis to be an infidel, as Sunni extremists loathe the Shi'ites as heretics and blasphemers.

"How much more so, if Assad were to reach out to Israel for a peace agreement?" Farkash asks. "He will only make peace if he knows that it doesn't endanger his control of Syria, and he can wait. After all, it was his father, not him, that lost the Golan in the first place."

But Van Creveld is less worried about Syria's internal troubles and more about Israel's external ones. "I know what the future will bring if we don't have an agreement with Syria," he says. "That is, sooner or later, but surely, a war. The question is if you prefer the dangers of peace to the dangers of war. I for one prefer peace."

Furthermore, Van Creveld sees peace negotiations as an opportunity to "hack off" the Iranian arm in Syria. "After all," he explains, "With the majority of Syria made up of Sunni Muslims, their relationship with Iran can be described at best as 'uncomfortable allies.'"

One thing is certain; the issue is a thorny one, with both a military and political dimension to consider, before even beginning to approach an Israeli public that won't be eager to give away a geographically strategic and beautiful spoil of the Six Day War, even if they do desire peace.

"I was always taught growing up here," says Van Creveld, "that peace is peace, and it's a good thing in itself."

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