

WAR AND PEACE

Does Syrian public really want relations with Israel?

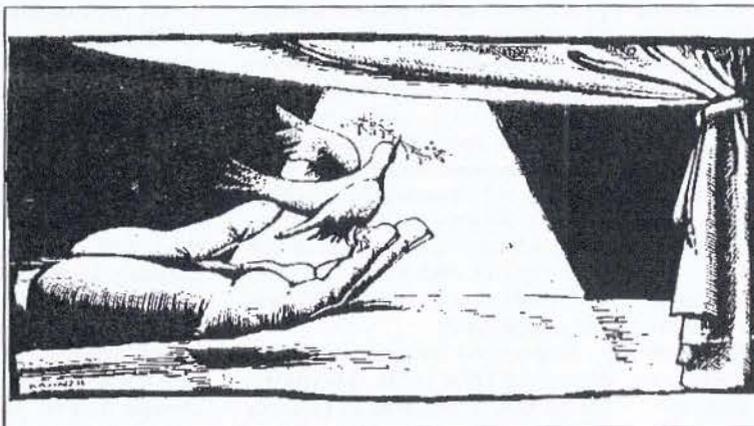
By Dr. Daniel Pipes

As the possibility of an agreement between Damascus and Jerusalem appears more likely, the following question arises: What do Syrians think about their two-generation conflict with Israel? No reply can be given with confidence, it being next to impossible to estimate public opinion in a totalitarian state like Syria. Still, bits of evidence exist, and it's worth making a try.

To begin with, for several years Syrians have been learning more about Israel. A country once portrayed as satanic has become more normal. Already in 1990, an unnamed "senior member" of Hafez Assad's entourage told an Israeli reporter, "It is much easier now. There are foreign papers; tourists arrive after a visit to Israel, and we talk to them; television airs mostly films about the *infidels*, so you can imagine how you (Israelis) are portrayed in them. We also listen to your radio broadcasts, particularly the newsreels. Besides, those of us who should know things about you do. The 'Israeli enemy' is a fact of life."

This increase in information surely has the long-term effect of improving Syrian attitudes toward democracy — a speculation confirmed by the small but steady number of Syrian military deserters finding their way to Israeli soil.

Pro peace. As for issues of war and peace, some Syrians



Artwork from the Los Angeles Times by Catherine Kanner. Distributed by Los Angeles Times Syndicate.

clearly want to end the conflict. Muhammad Aziz Shukri, dean of Damascus University's law school, told an American reporter in 1991, "There's a segment of the (Syrian) population that says, 'I'm not interested in the Arab-Israeli conflict. I just want a bottle of gas (for the kitchen stove).'"

Two years later, he ventured further, "Let us teach our kids that the Israelis are not animals, and let the Israelis teach their kids that we are not animals. Up to now, un-

fortunately, our behavior is of animals in the zoo."

A 30-year-old professional woman echoed his sentiments. "We want to stop hearing every day about Israeli aggression and start hearing about Syria," she said.

Consideration for the Palestinian cause seems to have waned over the decades. Nabil Ali, a Damascus clerk, commented, "Let's never mind the others. We should just get back the Golan and be finished with it."

Those with business interests show perhaps the greatest enthusiasm for ending the conflict. In the terse words of one merchant, "People are tired."

Travelers report that Damascus restaurants are preparing menus in Hebrew, and merchants in the market look forward to Israeli customers. In the same spirit, three tour operators defied the Ministry of Tourism and joined their Israeli counterparts at a recent tourism conference in Cairo.

Pro war. Others want to intensify the conflict. Muslim brethren routinely portray Assad as an Israeli agent and condemn the peace process as a betrayal. Intellectuals still warm themselves by the flame of Pan-Arab nationalism. Thus, Suhayl Zakkar, a professor of history at Damascus University, said, "I have learned two things as a Muslim in the past 50 years. There is one God, and there is one enemy, the Israeli."

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An unnamed female Syrian social researcher added, "You can have an authoritarian government like Assad's that can make anything stick. But popular acceptance of Israel is another story."

Jamal al-Atassi, one of Syria's few dissidents, disapproves of recent developments. "The regime is just trying to do what the United States wants it to do," he stated.

Reports from Israel indicate that Assad has polled top military officers to ascertain their views on the prospect of peace with Israel and that he holds occasional meetings with top commanders in which he "preaches to them the need for peace" with Israel — suggesting that the military leadership is "not totally at ease with the idea." Still, Israeli military intelligence "cannot identify any Syrian opposition that will disrupt" Assad's decision to make peace.

Generalizing, it would appear, as a Western diplomat in Damascus observed, that "the people outside the regime are much more prepared for peace than the elites are."

Confirming this impression, the special Russian envoy for Middle Eastern issues, Viktor Posuvalyuk, reportedly confided to the Israelis that he had found "substantial centers of opposition" to an agreement "at the highest echelons of the Syrian administration."

Polling data. Survey research, meager as it is, does not offer a

clear picture. David Pollock reports that a "modest commercial survey," held in the fall of 1991 in Damascus, pointed to mixed opinions about the forthcoming Madrid conference: 30 percent favored the meeting, 40 percent opposed it, and 30 percent did not comment.

Hilal Khashan found in a July 1993 survey of Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians that Syrian respondents living in Syria had some of the most negative views of the peace process (54 percent against, 28 percent for), while those in Beirut had almost exactly the opposite views (26 percent against, 54 percent for) — making them among the most favorable.

Conclusions. What does this all amount to? Observers are divided. Mamdu Adwan, a leading Syrian poet, believes "the majority of Syrians disagree with its foreign policy," even as it moderates toward the Jewish state.

Impressed by the peaceable mood in Damascus, journalist David Butter reported in October 1992 that "Syrians are overwhelmingly in favor of the moves toward peace with Israel."

But Barry Rubin, of the Hebrew University, reads the tea leaves just the opposite, arguing that Syrian concessions to Israel "would undermine popular support" for the Assad regime.

Godfrey Jansen takes the matter

a step further, characterizing Syrian feelings on the question of Israel as "perhaps the angriest in the Arab world, except for the (Palestinians in the) occupied territories."

Syrian leaders seem to find the latter interpretation more convincing. Foreign Minister Faruq ash-Shar declared in November 1991 that "the Syrian government wants peace more than its population."

Assad echoed this thought two years later when he said, "I am confident that I enjoy massive popular confidence in our country, and yet, if I did something the Syrian masses interpreted as being contrary to their aspirations, I might pay the price as others did" — an apparent allusion to those politicians (King Abdullah, Anwar Sadat, Bashir Jumayyil) assassinated after reaching a deal with Israel.

Public sentiment appears to weigh against a decision for full peace with Israel, especially if this means Israeli diplomats and tourists in Syria. While the Assad regime has the muscle to run roughshod over such sentiments, it has so far shown no discernible intent to confront the population over this issue. ■

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