

Stumbling Toward Another War: Meet Miss C.

Israel steps closer to war with Syria

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Introducing Miss Calculatsia, that fashionable foreigner, the new star in Israeli discourse.

To a Hebrew ear, she sounds like a young beauty, like “Miss Israel”. But Miss-Calculatsia, the Hebrew version of “miscalculation”, is neither young nor beautiful, nor even female: just another pretentious foreign word taking the place of a perfectly good Hebrew one.

(In Latin, “calculus” is a small stone. These were built into the abacus, which was used by the Romans long before they ever dreamed of computers.)

The miscalculation spoken of is not a beauty queen, but a queen of ugliness: a war between Israel and Syria that may break out any minute – not because Israel wants it, nor the Syrians, but because one side misjudges a provocative act that will push the other into war.

Like all wars, it will be a campaign of death and destruction, with bereavement and refugees, suffering and misery for both sides. And nobody can foresee how it will end.

Almost every day the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense and their minions declare that Israel is not interested in war. Not at all. Perish the thought.

It rather reminds one of Hamlet’s comment about his unfaithful mother: “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.” The more so as Ehud Barak makes his professions of peace while standing on the occupied Golan Heights, against a background of noisy tanks advancing in a war-like maneuver.

The Israeli army intelligence chiefs report that, according to their evaluation, Syria does not intend to start a war. According to them, war does not serve any Syrian interests at this time.

To complete the round, this week Hassan Nasrallah declared at a Beirut mass rally that Hizbullah, too, has no desire for war.

From “below” there is also no pressure for war. The Israeli public is afraid of it, and so, it seems, is the Syrian people.

So where does the daily talk about war come from? If nobody wants it, why is there so much talk about it? Why do the media, in Israel and throughout the world, report “tension on the Northern border of Israel”? Why is the Israeli army frantically conducting maneuvers on the Golan? Why are there reports about a rapid upgrading of Syrian weaponry and the hectic

building of fortifications against Israel? Why is the Turkish government offering urgent mediation between Israel and Syria?

All very mysterious.

It seems that the key to this mystery is not to be found in Jerusalem or Damascus, but in Washington.

When Ehud Olmert refuses to respond to the serenades of Bashar al-Assad, he hints that President Bush is forbidding any contact with the Syrians. Last year, America pushed Israel into the war in Lebanon, obstructed an early cease-fire and, so it seemed, was interested in extending the war into Syria.

Syria belongs, of course, to the “Axis of Evil” that exists in Bush’s mind. His Arab allies tell him, to no avail, that this is a mistake: Sunni Syria is no natural ally of the Iranian Shiites. It needs them only because the US is isolating it. Damascus uses the Shiite Hizbullah, so they explain, only to exert pressure on Beirut and on Jerusalem. Logic says that it is in the interest of the US to help make peace between Israel and Syria in order to pry Syria loose from the Iranian embrace. But Bush does not listen.

Perhaps he is pushing Olmert towards war with Syria in order to divert attention from his own Iraqi fiasco, which is worsening daily. Or perhaps he is interested only in some artificial tension, in order to bring about the fall of the Assad regime. The main thing is to set up another Arab democracy, on the lines of Egypt, Jordan or Saudi Arabia.

The question is: why is Israel taking part in this game?

The central figure in this play is Ehud Barak. His connection with Syria didn’t start yesterday. Eight years ago, during his short and calamitous term as Prime Minister, he played with the idea of making peace with Syria. He negotiated with Hafez al-Assad and – surprise, surprise – the parties arrived at the threshold of an historic peace agreement. The Golan would have been restored to Syria, the settlers removed, another important Arab country would live in peace with Israel.

And then the whole thing fell apart. The pretext was that the old Assad wanted to dip his long feet in the waters of the Sea of Tiberias, instead of stopping a few hundred yards away from it. But the real reason concerned the feet of Barak himself: they got cold. He escaped at the very last minute, and started the irresponsible adventure of Camp David.

I called him, at the time, a “peace criminal” – a serial political offender against peace. After failing at Camp David – because of his overweening arrogance and appalling contempt for Arabs – he invented the mantra: “We have no partner”. So it was not he who failed, and not the conference which he initiated without proper preparation.

No. It is the partner that has failed. There can be no peace with the Palestinians, just as there can be no peace with the Syrians. In the immortal saying of the ultra-ultra-rightist, Yitzhak Shamir: “The sea is the same sea, and the Arabs are the same Arabs”.

“We have no partner”. That mantra destroyed the Israeli peace movement and caused damage that, it seems, can hardly be repaired.

Ehud Olmert is keeping Barak out of the play he is now engaged in with Mahmoud Abbas. Why present a gift to a competitor? In revenge, Barak dismisses the idea of peace with the Palestinians with a wave of the hand. He announces that the idea of peace is a non-starter, because the Palestinian state would shower Israel with missiles. What is happening today to Sderot would happen tomorrow to Ben Gurion airport, which is only a few miles away from the Green Line.

This means that peace can be made only when Israel has a system that will provide an impenetrable defense against short-range missiles. When will that happen? In a few years. (But by then, the Palestinians will probably have more advanced missiles, and we shall need more advanced defense systems.)

Peace in three years, or in thirty, or in three hundred?

In the meantime, Olmert continues with his games. Almost every day a colorful new balloon goes up: peace proposals, “principles” for a peace that may come about at some indefinite time, a theoretical “peace agreement”. All these plans have one thing in common: they don’t touch reality, here and now. They belong to a distant rosy future, while very bad things are happening now on the ground.

It is President Bush, again, who is pushing Olmert in this direction. As much as he wants tension between Israel and the Syrians, he desires positive news about his “vision” of a “peace process” between Israel and the Palestinians. Let them float virtual “peace processes”, discuss documents for the time the Messiah will come, smile at each other, embrace. All to prove that Bush is winning after all, his “vision” is taking shape. That is good for Bush, good for Olmert, good for Abbas.

For whom is it not good? For the Palestinians, who are collapsing under the yoke of the occupation. The misery in the Gaza Strip deepens every day, as the plan unfolds to bring about a total collapse, anarchy and the fall of Hamas. The situation of the West Bank population is not much better. The roadblocks are staying where they are, and so are the settlements and outposts. The road network “for Israelis only” is getting longer, the construction of the wall is in full swing.

The most grievous expression of the situation in the occupied territories under Olmert and Barak is the daily killing. Almost no day passes without a new atrocity. A pupil is run over, his injuries are critical, he is kept at the roadblock over an hour until he dies. The army issues a laconic statement: he was on the list of those “forbidden to enter Israel”. Five soldiers seize a boy waiting at a bus stop and beat him to death. A sick woman arrives at a roadblock and is detained there for no apparent reason until she dies.

Such stories have become routine and no longer cause a ripple. Two or three journalists do still get upset and report them, the rest just ignore them. Senses have been blunted. It’s not news.

It might have been expected that somebody would get angry at the empty games of the “peace process”. After all, every thinking person knows that if Abbas achieves no political results, Hamas will drive him out of the West Bank as they did in Gaza, and that is supposed to frighten Israelis.

They are not frightened. Hamas will take over? So what! All-Arabs-are-the-same.

Syria has missiles that can reach every point in Israel. Including Tel-Aviv. Including Dimona. A war with Syria will be no joy-ride.

So what? People don't get upset. Barak says that there will be no war, but that perhaps there will be war. But that would be just a slight mis-calculation

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