

DANGERS LURKING IN THE DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT WITH SYRIA

Has Israel lost military advantages and has she endangered herself by making concessions for the sake of achieving a disengagement of forces on the Syrian front? This is a question still bothering many people at present.

From the military aspect the biggest and most significant concession was the willingness to retreat from the bulge. In this area, captured during the Yom Kippur War, Israel held obvious geographic and military advantages. The Israel Armed Forces were stationed here upon a whole line of hills serving as convenient observation posts and for directing fire at approaching Syrian tanks. It is possible from these hills to control the passes in the rocky Leja regions. Occupation of the bulge assured Israel that even at the worst, Arab armour would not be able to push us with ease towards the Jordan and its bridges--which happened in the Yom Kippur War.

Moreover, from this bulge on the Golan, Israel presented a direct threat of artillery to the Syrian capital. For every attack upon an Israel settlement, the Israel Army was able to make a counter artillery attack upon Damascus and scores of Syrian settlements. There was no need whatever to endanger planes in these attacks or to use weapons which might lead to some sort of escalation of the fighting. From every other point along the purple line, the Israel Army would have to use its air force for any similar action. The moment Israel withdrew from the bulge, it relinquished this important military advantage, and much blood-letting will be involved if there is a need to re-take it. But it is this concession which had the accord of all the political parties in Israel. The Israel Government expressed its willingness to withdraw from the bulge long before entering into negotiations for a disengagement of forces. The Opposition did not object to such withdrawal as part of an agreement; and I believe even the members of the Movement for Greater Israel remained silent on this point.

The situation on the Hermon is more far-reaching. It may be said concisely that the Hermon gave Israel the most significant electronic and artillery observation post of all, and by occupying it we were on the very flank of "Fatahland" in Lebanon. Thus in a sense we have lost a part of the advantages gained by handing them over to U.N. forces*, although we still retain that position on the Hermon held by us since 1967.

In regard to the other two parts, Kuneitra and withdrawal from the *knee* next to Rafid, the military significance of these two areas is minimal or valueless, particularly if one compares these to the bulge. But it was just these sections about which there was much argument in Israel, because of the prestige of Kuneitra for the Syrians and the significance of withdrawal beyond the purple line for Israel--not just the number of kilometres involved of the two places in themselves. This debate took on an acute political line since assurances were

*a special force called the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF)

given by government representatives that there would be no withdrawal beyond the purple line.

By conceding Kuneitra and the *knee*, Israel enabled Kissinger to satisfy the prestige of Damascus and to achieve a kind of exchange of territory so that Israel received, as previously mentioned, a part of the Hermon captured by it in 1967.

After the more significant concession of the bulge, that of Kuneitra and the *knee* hardly presented any further danger to our presence on the Golan Heights. Such a danger could have presented itself had Israel conceded the hills to the west of Kuneitra, making Washington and Damascus indirectly responsible for an Israeli decision to abandon two settlements on the Golan Heights. Possibly this had been the original intention, without it being actually stated. Here it would be justified to mention the specific stand taken up by Israel, including a leftist party, such as Mapam, towards the Golan Heights. This was the desire to give the Huleh settlements protection against the Syrians sitting above them and shelling them constantly for years. Few mentioned the important reason of protecting Israel's water sources which lie to the north of the Heights. Today, no one talks any longer of the settlements in the Huleh Valley, but of the settlements on the Golan Heights. Now, new "targets" are provided for the Syrians, and in order to protect these we don't want the Syrians to sit on Tel Abu-Nida and Tel Bental. This is a good enough reason for us (though not everyone is in agreement with it), but not for others. Obviously, we want the Golan Heights in order to protect our settlements there. On the basis of this process, if we had remained in the bulge for a number of years it is not inconceivable that we might have established Israeli settlements there too.

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When the Israel Government approved the establishment of settlements on the Heights, and the pioneer settlers went out to this region, everyone was aware of the dangers involved. If the dangers have mounted, this is not due to the changes in the region of Kuneitra and Rafid. It is quite possible that the disengagement agreement will bring these settlements a certain degree of relaxation from tension through the fact that a buffer zone of the U.N. Emergency Forces has been erected. It may not be very agreeable for us to have to admit this, but these are the new circumstances and we must be realistic and see them for what they are.

The change is expressed not only in the status of the settlements. Suffice it to recall how the IAF reacted at the end of the summer of 1972 when a Syrian post dared to assist terrorist action with their covering fire. The Air Force went out in full force, destroyed the special radar stations in Syria, bombed deep into Syrian territory and reached Atakia. Before the disengagement the Syrians conducted a full-scale war of attrition against us, while the Israel Army's reaction was restrained when compared with the 1972 action. The army could of course have struck severely at Syria, but then we didn't want to escalate another war. The question of the situation of the settlements was necessarily a part of the overall situation, but it was not merely a question of this area only.

When one brings up military reasons for disengagement, it is worth stressing another factor. The Israel Army is in need of a period of rest. After waging a difficult war the army needs some time in which to recuperate, reorganize and renew itself. There is at present a change-over of leadership, not only in the country itself, but also in the ranks of the army command. The new people need some time to settle down again. The process of recovery is indeed at its peak, and there are already clear signs of stabilization. A disengagement of forces will enable this process to proceed tranquilly and give the army a chance to prepare for any eventuality.

(Based on a Hebrew article by military correspondent Ze'ev Shiff which appeared in the Hebrew press.)