



Is Syria serious?

(Published in *ABC*, May 23, 2008)

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En letra impresa n° 974

May 23, 2008

On Wednesday, the Israeli Government confirmed holding indirect peace talks with Syria. Setting aside the irony that this announcement coincides with Prime Minister Olmert's lowest moments in office- he lacks all popular support and faces a criminal investigation over corruption allegations which may well put an end to his career- what are the incentives for Syria to honestly sign a peace deal with Israel?

Less than a month ago, Syria had mobilized his army towards the proximities of the Golan Heights, which forced the Israeli forces to take similar action. Less than six months ago, Israel warplanes targeted an illegal nuclear plant; and only yesterday, Damascus refused entrance to one of the facilities where work with atomic components may still have been carried out to two IAEA inspectors.

What sort of peace would we be talking about?

Syria is aware that Olmert is a weak leader, and the fact that the peace talks began right after the chaos of the Lebanon War in 2006 could lead to believe that Basher el Assad may be willing to take advantage of his weakness. However, the Syrians also know that Israel's lack of support for Olmert may difficult the hand over of the Golan Heights. They are also aware that in strategic terms, they can barely compete with the Israeli air force and army.

The Syrian cake would in fact have to be very sweet for Israel to feel tempted. The peace treaty is important, but the safeguard of the State of Israel is nowadays more threatened by non-governmental movements than by its neighbor States.

Lebanon is a growing concern and Damascus could guarantee greater stability provided it decided to take action in the area. However, action against Hezbollah would require Syria to break from its Iranian ally. Can Syria afford that? The experts do not seem to agree.

If Syria is serious, it might as well start closing the offices Hamas has in Damascus, put a stop to all the aid which is being provided to the guerrillas in Iraq and condemn the killing of their opponents in Lebanon. Otherwise, any treaty would just vanish into thin air.