

A Good War

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September 14, 2013

HERE IS ANOTHER Jewish joke: A hungry young Jew sees an announcement outside a local circus: anyone who climbs to the top of a 50 meter pole and jumps onto a tarpaulin below will win a prize of a thousand rubles.

Out of desperation he goes in, climbs the pole and shudders looking down.

“Jump! Jump!” the ringmaster shouts.

“Jumping is out of the question!” the Jew shouts back. *“But how do I get down again?”*

That’s how Barack Obama was feeling, a moment before the Russians provided the means.

THE TROUBLE with war is that it has two sides.

You prepare a war meticulously. You have a perfect plan. Future generals will study it in their academies. But once you make the first move, everything goes awry. Because the other side has a mind of its own and does not behave the way you expect.

A good example was provided exactly 40 years ago today (by the Hebrew calendar) with the Egyptian and Syrian attack on Israel. According to our planning, they shouldn’t and they couldn’t have done so. No way. They knew that our forces were superior and their defeat inevitable.

The chief of army intelligence, the man responsible for the overall evaluation of all intelligence gathered, coined the famous phrase: “low probability”. So, while hundreds of items indicated that an attack was imminent, the government of Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan still managed to be surprised when the Egyptians crossed the Suez Canal and the Syrians advanced down to the Sea of Galilee.

Some time before, I had warned the Knesset that the Egyptians were going to start a war. No one took any notice. I was no prophet. I had just returned from a peace conference with Arab delegates, and a very highly-placed Egyptian former colonel told me that Anwar al-Sadat would attack, if Israel did not accept his secret peace proposals and withdraw from Sinai. *“But you can’t win!”* I protested, *“He won’t attack in order to win, but in order to get the frozen situation moving again,”* he responded.

SINCE THEN, the phrase “low probability” has had an ominous ring in Israeli ears. No one ever used it. But during the last two weeks, it has made a sudden comeback.

Incredible as it sounds, it was given new life by our

army command. Eager to have the Americans attack Syria, and faced with a run on gas masks in Israel, they announced that there was a very low probability that Bashar al-Assad would retaliate by attacking Israel.

He wouldn’t dare, of course. How could he? His army is bogged down in fighting with the rebels. It is inferior to our army anyhow, and after two years of civil war it is even weaker than usual. So it would be madness on his part to provoke us. Absolutely. Very, very low probability.

Or is it?

It certainly would be, if Assad’s mind worked like that of an Israeli general. But Assad is not an Israeli general. He is the Syrian dictator, and his mind might work quite differently.

What about the following scenario:

The Americans attack Syria with missiles and bombs, with the intention of underlining the Red Line. Just a short, limited, action.

Assad declares Israel responsible and launches his missiles against Tel Aviv and Dimona.

Israel retaliates with a heavy attack on Syrian installations.

Assad declares that the civil war is over and calls upon all Syrians, and the entire Arab and Muslim world, to unite behind him to defend holy Arab land against the common Zionist enemy, the oppressor of the Palestinian brothers.

The Americans will rush to the defense of Israel and ...!

Low probability? My foot!

THEREFORE, I was as relieved as Obama himself when the Russians helped him to climb down the pole. Wow!

What will happen now to the chemical weapons? I don’t really care very much. I thought from the beginning that the hysteria about them was vastly overblown. Assad is quite capable of committing all the atrocities he wants without poison gas.

It should be remembered why his father produced this gas in the first place. He believed that Israel was developing nuclear weapons. Not being able to aspire to such expensive and technically advanced devices himself, he settled for much cheaper chemical and biological weapons as a deterrent. According to a secret 1982 CIA report,

Israel was producing such weapons itself.

So now we are in for a long process of negotiations, mutual recriminations, inspections, transfers of materials, and so on. Good for many months, if not years.

In the meantime, no American intervention. No regional war. Just the usual mutual bloodletting in Syria.

ISRAEL IS furious. Obama is a wimp. A coward. How dare he listen to American public opinion? Who will ever believe him again?

After this red line was crossed, who will believe in the much broader line Obama has drawn in the sands of Iran?

Frankly, nobody. But not because of Syria.

There is absolutely no similarity between the situation in Syria and in Iran. Even if the “limited” action had led to a bigger operation, as was quite possible, it would still have been a small war with little effect on American national interests. A war with Iran is a very different matter.

As I have written many times before, a war with Iran would immediately lead to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a world-wide oil crisis, a global economic catastrophe with unimaginable consequences.

I repeat: there will be no American—and no Israeli—attack on Iran. Period.

ACTUALLY, OBAMA comes out of this crisis rather well.

His hesitation, which evoked so much contempt in Israel, does him credit. It is right to hesitate instead of rushing into war. In war, people get killed. Even a surgical strike can kill very many people. In laundered military language, it’s called “collateral damage”.

We should know. Years ago, Israel started a tiny little operation in Lebanon and unintentionally killed a lot of people in a UN refugee camp.

Also, Obama did use military force the way it should be used: not for fighting, if fighting can be avoided, but for giving weight to diplomatic pressure. The Russians would not have moved, and Assad would not have bent to their pressure, if there had not been the credible threat of an American military strike. Even Obama’s decision to ask for congressional approval was right in this context. It provided the breathing space which made the Russian

initiative possible.

Yes, the Russians are back in the Great Game. They will also play a role in the coming confrontation with Iran. They are just too big to ignore. And Vladimir Putin is too shrewd a player to allow himself be shoved aside.

For viewers with a literary bent, the interplay between Obama and Putin is fascinating—such different characters, such different motivations. Like the sword-wielding and the trident-wielding gladiators in the ancient Roman arena.

And the UN is back again, too. The good old UN, so inefficient, so weak, but so necessary in situations like these. God bless them.

BUT WHAT about Syria? What about the ongoing massacre, a.k.a. civil war? Will it go on forever? Can this crisis be turned around into a solution?

I think that it is possible.

Now that the US and Russia are not at loggerheads, and Iran is speaking with a much more reasonable voice (thank you for your Rosh Hashana greetings) we might perhaps cautiously, very cautiously, think about a solution.

I can, for example, imagine a joint American-Russian initiative along the following lines:

Syria will be reorganized as a federal state, similar to Bosnia or Switzerland.

It will be composed of confessional cantons along existing lines: Sunni, Alawi, Kurdish, Druze etc.

Instead of the all-powerful president, there will be a collective or rotating presidency. That will solve the personal problem of Assad.

This is a solution everybody can live with. I don’t see any other that can be adopted without much bloodshed. I don’t think that one can go back to the status quo ante. The alternative to this solution is endless bloodshed and the breaking up of the state.

If anything like this solution is adopted, this crisis may yet bear valuable fruit.

Showing once again that the only good war is a war avoided.