ONLINE EDITION
JERUSALEM POST

Withdrawing from the Golan talks

Dec. 20, 2008
EMMANUEL NAVON , THE JERUSALEM POST

Reuters reported this week that Syria has drafted a document defining boundaries on the Golan Heights, placing Syria on the northern shore of the Kinneret. Damascus is waiting for an Israel reply through Turkish mediators.

There is something absurd about the current talks between Israel and Syria and about Turkey's alleged role as a peace broker. Turkey is basically telling Israel to relinquish territories to Syria to achieve peace, while Turkey itself achieved peace with Syria as a result of its obstinate refusal to give in to its territorial demands over the Hatay (or Alexandretta) Province.

Historically, the Hatay Province is more Syrian than Turkish. European maps from the 18th century show this region as being part of Syria. With the end of World War I and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, Hatay became part of the French Mandate over Syria. Turkey, however, claimed that it should have been granted sovereignty over the province because of the high percentage of ethnic Turks living there. In 1921, France and Turkey signed a compromise granting a special autonomy status to the province, but this compromise was basically canceled in 1925 when France fully reestablished its sovereignty over Hatay.

In 1936, Turkey submitted a complaint to the League of Nations, demanding full sovereignty over what it claimed to be an ethnically Turkish province. The League of Nations partially accepted Turkey's claim and granted a special status to the province in 1937 (it was now "distinct but not separated" from the French Mandate). In 1938, the regional assembly of Hatay proclaimed the independence of the "Republic of Hatay," taking as an excuse the riots that had broken out between Turks and Arabs.

The name Hatay was proposed by Kemal Atatürk and the government was under Turkish control. The Turks organized a referendum approving the annexation of the province by Turkey. France, which feared German invasion, was not willing to open an additional front with Turkey over the issue of the Hatay Province. The League of Nations was too "busy" with the looming war, and had ceased to be relevant anyway.

SYRIA NEVER recognized the annexation of Hatay (which it calls Liwa Aliskenderun) by Turkey. It claims that the Turkish annexation was illegal and that France had no right or authority to tacitly agree to it. Official Syrian maps still show the province as being part of Syria. For many years, the conflict over the province created military and diplomatic tensions between the two countries. Syria's position was that there could never be peace with Turkey until Turkey returned the province. Turkey accused Syria of supporting the Kurdish separatist groups in eastern Turkey, but never offered to withdraw from Hatay to convince Syria to end its support for them.

And yet, Syria and Turkey announced in 2005 the normalization of their diplomatic relations. Syria did not abandon its claims over Hatay, but it did abandon its demand for a return of the province to its sovereignty as a condition for ending hostilities.

TURKEY ACHIEVED this volte-face through steadfastness. The Turkish position was clear: There is nothing to talk about. Turkey is interested in peace with Syria, but can also do without it. If Syria wants

peace, it has to forget about Hatay and stop supporting Kurdish terrorism. End of story.

Turkey's strategy worked, which makes its "recommendation" to Israel to adopt the opposite strategy to achieve the same results quite puzzling indeed. No less puzzling is the fact that Israel is putting up with this farce.

Some say that one cannot compare Turkey's rights over Hatay with Israel's rights over the Golan. True enough - Israel has a much stronger case than Turkey. Israel conquered the Golan in a war of self-defense, while Turkey annexed Hatay taking advantage of France's crumbling power. Israel has a stronger case than Syria as well. Archeological discoveries in the Golan point out to an antique Jewish, not Syrian, presence there. The Golan has been under Israeli sovereignty for 40 years and under Syrian sovereignty for 20. In international relations, time is one of the factors that determine sovereignty. Didn't the British Foreign Office recently declare that not recognizing China's sovereignty over Tibet had become "anachronistic"?

But even if Israel has a stronger case over the Golan than Syria, would it not make sense for Israel to relinquish it to achieve peace on its northern border? After all, Israel achieved peace with Egypt after withdrawing from Sinai, didn't it?

Well, no, it didn't. What Israel achieved with Egypt is not peace but a permanent cease-fire. And the price we paid (relinquishing Sinai) was worth paying and for pulling Egypt out of the Soviet orbit, since we couldn't afford an endless war of attrition with the Soviet-backed Egypt at the height of the Cold War.

What was worth paying in the case of Egypt is not worth paying in the case of Syria. The permanent cease-fire is the only kind of peace that can be achieved in the Middle East. We have that with Syria. Syria is no major regional power supported by a superpower hostile to Israel. The de facto peace we currently have is based on Israel's deterrence. Talking about a possible Israeli withdrawal from the Golan while Syria buys Russian weapons and tries to build nuclear plants with Iranian support is the best way to decrease Israel's power of deterrence. Why should we pay a high price (the Golan) for something we already have (de facto peace)?

If Israel wants to keep its northern border quiet and even normalize its relations with Syria, it should learn from Turkey's example and ignore Turkey's "friendly advice." Instead of withdrawing from the Golan Heights, Israel should withdraw from the Golan talks.

The writer is the founding partner of the Navon-Levy Group Ltd. and a lecturer at the Abba Eban Graduate Program for Diplomacy Studies at Tel Aviv University.