

{JANUARY 10 2004}

# A FOX CALLED LION

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**Y**ou really can't rely on these Arabs. Take this fellow, Qaddafi. For decades he played the clown. The whole world laughed at him (except when he downed a French plane in Chad and the Pan-Am jet over Lockerbie.) His Libya was a "rogue state", an international pariah. He was working on Weapons of Mass Destruction. The Americans hated him, and from time to time bombed him, killing his daughter on one such occasion.

You could rely on good old Qaddafi. He supplied us with an alibi for producing all kinds of interesting weapons. Everybody understood that with such people around, Israel needs the doomsday weapon, and that it's useless to talk about peace.

And then, suddenly?

Suddenly Qaddafi becomes the darling of the world. Look at him, in his Bedouin robes: a serious man, a sober and pragmatic statesman. Pays a fortune to the families of the victims in the planes he has downed. Invites the Americans along to see for themselves how he destroys his stock of WMD. Flatters President Bush. Makes advances to Israel. Tomorrow – God forbid! – he may invite Bush to mediate between himself and his dear colleague, Ariel Sharon.

If Bush starts to pamper Qaddafi, he will coddle Sharon less. He might get the idea that Israel, too, should get rid of its Weapons of Mass Destruction. Perish the thought!

Or take Iran. Well, they aren't really Arabs, but they are Muslims, and all Muslims are the same, aren't they? Anti-Semites. Israel-haters. Plotting to destroy us.

One used to be able to rely on Iran. There is always somebody there shouting "Death to America! Death to Israel!" They are trying to produce nuclear bombs. They vow to bury the Great Satan together with the Small Satan (us). True, we did sell them some arms, quite quietly, with American blessing (see: Irangate), but that doesn't count. President Bush even included them in his "Axis of Evil". We were hoping that after the occupation of Iraq, the Americans would deal with them. Between Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran sits like an almond between the jaws of a nutcracker.

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And then, suddenly..

Suddenly Iran is dripping honey. They thank the Americans for the generous assistance sent to the victims of the big earthquake. They invite international inspectors to check their nuclear installations.

And the Americans – who can believe it? – let themselves be seduced. They emit conciliatory noises. And there are already some people who expect us to behave like Libya and Iran, to open our nuclear installations to inspection. Perish the thought!

But all this is nothing compared to Syria.

If there was one Arab nation you could rely on without reservation it was the Syrians. Born Israel-haters. Tough. Uncompromising. Stockpiling chemical and biological weapons. True, they respect the cease-fire line with Israel, but they use the Hizbollah against us instead. And they play host to the headquarters of the militant Palestinian organizations in Damascus.

The Bush administration has officially labeled Syria a terrorist state. It has targeted them. Our friends in the Pentagon, Wolfowitz and the other Neo-Zionists, promised us that Syria would be the next candidate for an American invasion, right after Iraq. Our good friends, the Turks, were also to join in the party. After all, they have had an ongoing quarrel with Syria since the late 1930s, when the French (who controlled Syria at the time) gave them the Syrian Alexandretta region. And this conflict deepened even more when Syria began supporting the Kurdish revolt in Turkey and demanded a bigger share of the Euphrates water.

And now, suddenly?

Suddenly this youngster, Bashar, changes direction overnight. Suddenly al-Assad (“the Lion”) turns into al-Taleb (“the Fox”). Says he wants peace. Wants to help the Americans. Invites Israel to renew negotiations. Visits Turkey and forges an alliance with them against Kurdish independence in northern Iraq.

That is dangerous. Terribly dangerous. The Americans might pressure us to make peace with Syria and give the Golan back to them. True, up to now, the Americans have reacted coolly to the Syrian overtures, but that may change. As the American elections draw nearer, and Bush’s adversaries increasingly paint the Iraq war as one big fiasco, Bush will be keen to demonstrate that the war was actually an enormous success. To wit: It has created a New Middle East (alas, without Shimon Peres). The wicked states, Iran, Syria and Libya, have forsaken their bad old ways and are basking in the Pax Americana. All the Weapons of Mass Destruction in the region have been abolished, except for Israel’s.

No wonder the Sharon government is in a dilemma. They are doing what they can to foil this plot. They publish Qaddafi’s overtures, so as to embarrass him into denying

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them. They reject Assad's peace stratagem. "Don't run and jump!" Sharon admonished his ministers this week, commanding them not to get excited about it. Assad is not serious. He only wants to suck up to the Americans. He wants to use us in order to reach Bush. For him, Israel is only "a stair of the White House", as Sharon put it.

Defeatists might say: let's seize the opportunity. Assad is weak? Assad is afraid? Assad wants to appease the Americans? All the better, that is the opportunity to make peace. What have we got to lose? If Assad is serious, we can put an end to our conflict with a dangerous enemy. And if he isn't, we will unmask him.

(The same defeatists proposed in 1972, too, that we should accept the peace offers sent by Anwar Sadat via the UN emissary, Gunnar Jarring. But Israel had a tough leader, Golda Meir, who rejected them "out of hand". True, this led to the Yom-Kippur war and the deaths of some 2000 young Israelis, not to mention the tens of thousands of Egyptians and Syrians, but it certainly screwed the defeatists.)

Sharon will not accept the Syrian proposal, because that might lead to peace. And peace with the Syrians would mean the return of the Golan and the dismantling of all the settlements there. That would be awful. It would also be a dangerous precedent for the Palestinians.

Bashar Assad, the fox in lion's clothing, wants to renew the negotiations at the point where they were broken off by Ehud Barak. At the time, Barak just managed to save himself from the threat of peace in the nick of time. Assad Sr. would accept nothing less than regaining the shores of Lake Tiberias (the June 4, 1967 line) instead of staying ten meters short of it (the 1949 line). Barak couldn't stand the idea of Assad dipping his long feet in the waters of this lake. Now Assad Jr. is hinting that he is prepared to forgo the pleasure. He can dip his long feet somewhere else. Perhaps in the waters of the Euphrates.

Sharon will not repeat the mistake of Barak, who barely extricated himself by the skin of his teeth. He will not start negotiations at all. And indeed, if Assad is weak, why negotiate with him?

Catch 23: If the Arabs are strong, you can't make peace with them. You have to defeat them. And if the Arabs are weak, there is no need to make peace with them. Why offer them anything?

Catch 24: If the Arabs say they want war, you have to believe them. But if the Arabs say they want peace, they are clearly lying. And how can you make peace with liars?