

Israel Talks to Syria

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Israel and Syria announced last Wednesday (May 21) in simultaneous statements that they had begun indirect talks in Turkey, thus confirming that two long-time enemies are talking again for the first time in almost a decade. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said the following day that Israel wanted peace with its neighbors, but Syria needed to “distance itself completely” from its “problematic ties” with Iran. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem says Israel had indicated readiness for a full withdrawal from the occupied Golan Heights, seized in June 1967, though Israeli officials have been unwilling to confirm or deny his claim.

Israel’s key objective is to dismantle the Syrian-Iranian alliance in order to neutralize Hezbollah. The new Lebanese president, Michel Suleiman, is [aware of this reality](#), having liaised both with the Shiite militia and with Syria when he served as commander of the army. In his inaugural speech, Suleiman said that “the rise of the resistance [i.e. Hezbollah] was a necessity in light of the fragmentation of the state.” He also talked of the “need for a defense strategy to protect Lebanon” and warned against Hezbollah’s further involvement “in domestic struggles.” Israel’s reopening of peace negotiations with Syria is a welcome move for two reasons, one geopolitical and the other domestic.

Hezbollah’s [recent raw triumph](#) in Lebanon has made President [Bashir al Assad](#) uneasy and justifiably nervous. He is a secularist and would-be reformer, pushed into an uneasy alliance of convenience with Iran by the relentless hostility of the Bush Administration. He is not a devout Muslim, let alone an Islamic visionary (and mainstream Sunni Muslims would say that, as an Allawite, he is a heretic). He knows that, given half a chance, the [local Muslim Brotherhood](#) outfit would do to him what Nasrallah’s boys [have done](#) to Fouad Seniora and Walid Jumblat. Bashir is therefore ready and willing to diversify his options. This means that it is finally possible to effect Syria’s separation from Hezbollah, and—more importantly—from Iran. At the same time, Israel’s beleaguered Prime Minister Ehud Olmert needs a major diplomatic success to offset his collapsing credibility at home. He seems to think that Golan is a [price worth paying](#).

Secondly, the spectacle of Israel talking to Syria without preconditions is equally unpalatable to the Bush Administration, to Senator John McCain, which means that it is a Very Good Thing. The insistence by Bush, McCain, and their advisors and handlers that mere readiness to talk to those they’ve designated as pariahs equals appeasement, if not treason, is not only false and tedious; it is dangerous. Such mindset seeks to eradicate the remaining vestiges of Washington’s ability to engage in a meaningful diplomatic discourse, not only in the Middle East but also in Cuba, Venezuela, the Balkans, and other trouble spots. If Olmert can unconditionally talk to Assad, directly or by proxy, it is ridiculous for McCain to go on insisting that the United States cannot talk to Ahmadinejad, or Hugo Chavez, or Raul Castro.

It has been obvious for years that an Islamist alternative to Assad (or to any other authoritarian yet secularist regime in the region, e.g. in Algiers) would prove far more detrimental to American interests than the status quo. Syria presents a diplomatic realist with many creative possibilities. Both Assad and the ineffectual old guard he has [inherited from his late father](#) are nervous and keen to make a deal with Israel first, and America next, if they are then left in peace. Their desire to avoid trouble is evident in the Golan Heights, the area that Israel occupied from Syria in 1967 and has held ever since: there are no skirmishes, infiltrations, grenade launchings, or Kassam rocket firings—nothing. It is one of the most peaceful boundaries in the Middle East. Bashir is ready to sign a peace treaty with Israel, and let it keep some parts of Golan “on lease”—99 years, say—if Syria is removed from Washington’s list of “rogue states” that are in need of a touch of color-coded revolution, if not a round of robust reeducation by the USAF.

Assad’s connection with Iran can and should be broken. It is neither natural nor inevitable. In addition to being a secularist, he is an Arab, and therefore unlikely to be indifferent to the implications of Iran’s desire to project its power and influence across the Fertile Crescent and all the way to the Mediterranean. If Assad can be won over to the idea of a peace treaty with Israel, in return for Washington’s recognition of the legitimacy of his regime, a key link in Iran’s strategic design will have been broken. Given the right incentive, Assad would also seal any remaining channels of support for the insurgents in Iraq and help make the quagmire there more manageable for the United States.

On the credit side, Syria had never been guilty of a terrorist outrage comparable to the outrage of Lockerbie—yet Libya’s Gaddafi, having done his penance, has been rehabilitated. In the aftermath of 9-11 Damascus passed on to the United States hundreds of files on Al Qaeda and other anti-Western terrorist individuals and movements throughout the Middle East, many of which targeted Jordan, Saudi Arabia and others besides the United States. In an interview with the *New York Times* in 2004, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell [said Syrian officials](#) “gave me some information with respect to financial activities (of insurgents in Iraq) and how we can cooperate more fully on that.” In brief, Syria has the potential to become America’s more useful partner in the “War on Terror” than Saudi Arabia has ever been. Any “regime change” in Damascus remains a [perilous](#) proposition for as long as the Muslim Brotherhood represents the only likely alternative to Assad.

The “Oslo Process,” as conceived by those who initiated it, has come to an end years ago, and there is no imminent replacement. The political principle of Oslo was an ongoing trade-off of various items in bilateral negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians working jointly toward a final, permanent peace agreement. As Secretary Rice’s and President Bush’s futile visits have confirmed in recent weeks, this principle has broken down: there are no meaningful negotiations on final status, there are no talks on interim agreements, and there is no cooperation and coordination on security related issues. Some momentum is needed, and the negotiations in Istanbul may provide it.

On Wednesday the United States [voiced distinctly lukewarm support](#) support for the talks. U.S. officials said they would welcome a peace agreement between Syria and Israel, but they also made clear their focus would be on the Israeli-Palestinian track. The White House said it had “no objections” to the initiative – in which U.S. officials are not involved but have been kept informed – and stressed its concerns about Syria’s alleged support for terrorism abroad and its “repression” at home. President George W. Bush apparently continues to hope against hope that he can get the Israelis and Palestinians to reach some form of peace

agreement by the end of the year, despite deep scepticism among all parties involved. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sought to tamp down the view the United States was not enthusiastic about the Israeli-Syrian talks but she stressed she viewed talks with the Palestinians as “the most mature track.”

In other words, Ms. Rice and her bosses want the talks to fail, or to be seen to have failed, so that Damascus can be pushed firmly back into the Multilateral of Evil, where – in the neoconservative scheme of things – it rightfully belongs. Rice’s cautious choice of words notwithstanding, the US administration continues to reject any rehabilitation of Syria and believes – mistakenly, as it happens – that it has made progress on isolating Damascus and Tehran. Nobody in Washington will say so aloud, but any positive movement in the direction of *either* Syria or Iran continues to be seen, inside the Beltway, as detrimental to the US and its strategy in the Middle East. Washingtonian *Schadenfreude* is in marked contrast to the views of Israeli officials. Any peace deal between Israel and Syria [would dramatically change the face of the Middle East](#), in particular by isolating Iran and silencing Hizbullah, according to the Israeli Infrastructure Minister, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer. “We are talking about a true peace, an end to hostilities, an opening of the borders, and Israel is ready to pay the price for such a peace and coexistence with Syria,” he said.

Even if the U.S. support for Israel’s approach to Syria is absent at this stage, it is worth remembering that every significant Arab-Israeli contact—from the [Dayan-Tohami talks](#) in Morocco that started the Israeli-Egyptian process, the contacts between Ephraim Halevy, acting on behalf of Yitzhak Rabin and King Hussein, and the Israeli and Palestinian academics, who started things rolling in Oslo—all began as back channel contacts that initially had been kept secret from Washington.

American support will be crucial if and when a Syrian-Israeli deal is finally hammered. Bashir al-Assad will not sever his alliance with Iran in exchange for mere promises of an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. For Bashir to take such promises seriously, it is necessary to obtain U.S. guarantees. Such guarantees are not going to be give in the final months of GWB. But whatever comes of the current round of Israeli-Syrian talks, the next U.S. President would be well advised to remember that Assad is not an ideologue, and that he may be induced into a comprehensive deal that would serve U.S. interests in the region at little or no cost to American prestige or treasury.

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