

Mediterranean Summit: Assad sees no Israeli peace talks with Bush in office

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By Samia Nakhoul

PARIS (Reuters) – Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said U.S. President George W. Bush was not interested in the Middle East peace process and as result he did not expect direct talks with Israel until Bush leaves office next January.

Ending years of isolation from the West, Assad on Saturday met French President Nicolas Sarkozy on the eve of a major EU-Mediterranean summit and signalled his willingness to improve relations with both Syria's neighbours, Israel and Lebanon.

Assad said he did not believe Iran was seeking atomic weapons, but he wanted a political solution and would convey Sarkozy's doubts about Tehran's nuclear programme to Iranian leaders, with whom Syria has close relations.

The Syrian president also said he wanted France to play a role in any eventual face-to-face talks with Israel, but added that it was essential for the United States to also be present.

"Quite frankly, this American administration is not interested in the peace process, so the question (of direct talks) won't arise before the arrival of a new American administration," Assad told a news conference.

The United States elects a new president in November and President George W. Bush will step down in January 2009.

Syria launched indirect peace talks with Israel this year under Turkish mediation over the return of the Golan Heights captured by Israel in 1967.

The last direct talks between the Israel and Syria under U.S. sponsorship broke down eight years ago and Washington has been reluctant to re-engage with Damascus because of its role in Lebanon and close ties with Iran.

U.S. State Department spokesman Rob McInturff said on Saturday it was not ready to resume full contacts with Syria.

"We, along with the international community, are awaiting a signal that the Syrians are truly ready to renounce their sponsorship of terrorism and do more to end the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq, expel the leadership of Palestinian terrorist groups from Syria and human

rights violations,” he said.

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France had also treated Syria as a virtual pariah state following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in 2005, which Paris blamed on Damascus.

Assad has rejected the accusation and relations with France improved this year after Syria helped end a long-running political stalemate in Lebanon by supporting a power-sharing deal among Lebanon’s pro-Western and pro-Syrian factions.

Sarkozy said he would visit Damascus in September.

Lebanon’s new president, Michel Suleiman, was also in Paris on Saturday and met Assad for the first time. Sarkozy said the two men had agreed to open embassies in each other’s country.

“I would like to say, what a historic step forward it is for France that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is determined to open a diplomatic representation in Lebanon, and that Lebanon should open a diplomatic representation in Syria,” he said.

The establishment of embassies would amount to a Syrian recognition of Lebanon’s sovereignty.

Syria has long been a dominant player in Lebanon’s political and military affairs but the two countries have not exchanged ambassadors since Lebanon’s independence in 1943.

Assad said Sarkozy has asked him to use his influence with Iran to help resolve Tehran’s nuclear standoff with the West.

“We see the solution as a political one. We cannot consider any solution that is not political because the consequences will be dangerous ...”

“Of course, we will pass on to Iran what has just been said, but we think that to the best of our knowledge, Iran has no intention of trying to obtain nuclear weapons,” he said.

The Paris EU-Mediterranean summit has given Assad a chance to regain the international spotlight, but he suggested he would not use Sunday’s meeting for an historic first meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

He told the news conference he did not see the point of such an encounter while indirect talks were still going on.

Sunday’s summit will draw more than 40 heads of state and government to Paris and is aimed at breathing new life into the existing Euro-Med partnership, creating a more equal dialogue between countries lining the Mediterranean.

(Writing by Crispian Balmer and Paul Taylor; additional reporting by Emmanuel Jarry and Francois Murphy; editing by Matthew Jones)

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