

Washington and Israel discuss possible war against Syria

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The Bush administration has used discussions between Israeli Transportation Minister and former Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns to insist that there should be no talks between Israel and Syria.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters Wednesday June 6, "We're not going to manage Israeli foreign policy. But let's take a look at Syria's behavior over the recent past, and I don't think you're going to find many indications of Syria showing the rest of the world that they are interested in playing a constructive, positive role in trying to bring about a more peaceful, secure region."

McCormack accused Syria of continuing to support terrorist groups in Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories and cited its links to Iran.

The possibility of opening a dialogue with the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus had earlier been mooted at a special security cabinet meeting that same day in Israel by President Ehud Olmert. The meeting was called to discuss the growing threat of war with Syria.

Olmert took the occasion to stress that Israel wanted peace with Syria and must be wary of miscalculations that could lead to war. He also stated that he did not rule out direct dialogue with Syria, without any preconditions. The newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* reported that Olmert had also relayed a secret message to Damascus saying Israel would return Golan to Syria in exchange for a comprehensive peace. This included the insistence that Syria severed all ties to Iran, the Lebanese Shia Islamist movement Hezbollah and "the Palestinian terror organisations and stop funding and promoting terror."

The framing of Olmert's demands is deliberately provocative and strongly suggests that his pose is largely motivated by an attempt to shore up his crisis-ridden coalition government with Labour.

Olmert has no functioning defence minister, after Labour's Amir Peretz was knocked out in the first round of the party's leadership contest. Peretz will be replaced as party leader next week by either former Prime Minister Ehud Barak or retired admiral and former Shin Bet internal security chief Ami Ayalon, both of whom have called for Olmert to resign over the debacle suffered by Israel in the war against Lebanon last summer. Ayalon has even threatened to take Labour out of the coalition, which would force a general election.

At the security cabinet meeting Olmert claimed—without providing any evidence—that Syria

had refused his call for peace talks. However, last week Syria's Foreign Minister Walid Muallem had told the *Guardian* newspaper that Damascus was "ready to resume peace talks with Israel based on the principle of land for peace. Unfortunately we received many signals from Israeli public opinion but we have seen no official readiness."

Whatever his real intentions—or indeed his own eventual fate—Olmert is responding to a very real possibility of war.

His remarks are at least in part meant to placate a section of the Israeli ruling elite that has been arguing for a concerted effort to engage with Syria, utilizing military and diplomatic threats as a stick and the Golan Heights as a carrot to drive a wedge between Damascus and what many consider to be the main enemy, Iran. These elements also seek to isolate Hezbollah prior to a possible military offensive by Lebanon's pro-Western government of Fouad Siniora and to weaken Hamas in Gaza, where Israel is supporting President Mahmoud Abbas and Fateh in the factional warfare that has broken out.

Within the ruling coalition Peretz, who remains a significant player within Labour, has argued, "A diplomatic process with Syria could immediately and dramatically change the balance on three fronts [i.e., Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian front], so picking up the gauntlet, or exploring any chance for sincere negotiations with Syria is, in my opinion, an option that absolutely must not be neglected." Several other ministers, including Meir Sheetrit of Kadima and Labour's Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, have also called for a renewal of peace talks.

On the other side of the foreign policy dispute in Israel are those opposed to any talk of concessions to Syria, who insist that Damascus must continue to be bracketed alongside Tehran and stress the need for Israel to prepare for open military conflict.

The leader of the opposition Likud, Benjamin Netanyahu, this week used the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 Six Day war to insist that withdrawal from "Judea and Samaria" would expose Israel to the threat of annihilation. Victory had transformed Israel from a "feeble and fragile country whose existence was questionable, into a state which cannot be defeated," he said.

On the Golan Heights, which Israel first captured in 1967 and annexed in 1981, he added, "As we are on these mountains, we are unbeatable." At a debate organized by Peace Now, he declared, "What is a peace agreement with Syria worth? A piece of paper!"

Within the coalition Avigdor Lieberman of the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu is vehemently against even a partial withdrawal from the Golan Heights and talks are also opposed by Shas ministers Eli Yishai and Yitzhak Cohen.

Differences of emphasis notwithstanding, both positions have developed within the framework of advanced military and political preparations for a possible war against Syria, which many sources predict could take place by the summer.

One Israeli intelligence report has suggested that Syria, Iran and Hezbollah are coordinating to form a joint front in preparation for war over the summer. Security sources also allege a Syrian arms build-up, including sophisticated Russian anti-aircraft systems and long-range missiles, and military preparations on its northern borders, including an underground missile command center capable of striking any part of Israel.

The day before the security cabinet meeting and the discussions in Washington, Israel staged a large-scale exercise involving infantry units, tank divisions and the air force in the southern Negev simulating the invasion of Syria. Peretz told the media that the Israeli Defence Force was indeed preparing for the possibility of war with Syria.

Commenting on the exercise in the *Jerusalem Post*, Yaakov Katz described it as an expression of the IDF's "shift from the Palestinian and Hizbullah threat to Syria." He noted, "For the first time in years, the annual exercise simulated the conquest of a Syrian village by infantry armor and airborne units, and not a Palestinian one, as had been tradition since the second intifada. 'The IDF is preparing for an escalation on both the Palestinian and the northern fronts,' Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi said, as he watched the tanks cross over makeshift bridges to invade a 'Syrian village.' 'The display seen here today is quite impressive. Only one element is lacking—an enemy.'"

The day the security cabinet met, Israel's Channel 2 news reported that Syria has set August as the month it will finalise preparations for war and "planned to complete training of its military forces within eight months." Channel 2 showed pictures of Israeli military tanks "ready for any possible Syrian attack" and quoted Mofaz claiming that Syria possesses long range missiles "which can hit Jerusalem in case war erupted."

The security cabinet established an 11-member ministerial committee on Syria, which will receive regular briefings and details of the army's preparations. Senior IDF commanders had presented to the cabinet the army's preparations for a possible conflict on Israel's northern border. Military Intelligence chief Major General Amos Yadlin had stressed the possibility of a war breaking out due to a "miscalculation." He stated that the Syrian Army was capable of redeploying from its defensive formation and attacking Israel with relative speed, but he did not believe Damascus wanted to do so. His principal concern was that Syria might react wrongly to an Israeli move and encourage an attack by Hezbollah from Lebanon.

Olmert appealed for cabinet members not to discuss the possibility of war with Syria, but Lieberman actually left the cabinet meeting at one point to give a radio interview in which he claimed that Syria was arming itself at an unprecedented pace.

"Managing Israeli foreign policy" is in fact precisely what Washington is doing. The political divisions in Israel over how to deal with Syria echo those within the Bush administration, with Rice reportedly favouring diplomatic efforts to drive a wedge between Damascus and Tehran and Vice President Dick Cheney opposed. Cheney was reportedly in favour of Israel directly engaging with Syria during last summer's attack on Lebanon and led Republican denunciations of the visit to Syria in April by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat.

Rice herself met with Syria's foreign minister for a "business-like" 30 minutes on May 3 at a conference on how to stabilize Iraq at Sharm el Sheik, Egypt—and also tried unsuccessfully to meet with her Iranian counterpart. But afterwards she again assumed a hard line, insisting that Damascus had to close its Iraq border to foreign fighters and crack down on Palestinian "extremists" if it wanted to restore relations with Washington.

After his meeting with Rice and Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns, Mofaz, who had also earlier raised the possibility of talks with Syria, stressed that Israel wanted to give greater priority to building peace with the Palestinians. When asked whether peace efforts would be revived with Syria, he replied several times, "Our first priority should be Palestinian discussions."

He also insisted that “Hezbollah will never leave southern Lebanon. It is arming with missiles that could hit central and even southern Israel.” And he urged that a deadline of the end of this year be placed on Iranian compliance with US demands for the suspension of its nuclear programme.

The next day, Mofaz responded to reports of a seizure of armaments by the Lebanese army by insisting that the weapons had come from Iran via Syria.

En route to Berlin for a meeting of Middle East Quartet, Rice denied Washington was blocking Israeli efforts to engage in peace talks with Syria.

“No one is opposed to Israel pursuing other tracks, including a Syria track,” she said, “But my understanding is that it’s the view of the Israelis and certainly our view that the Syrians are engaged in behavior right now that is destabilizing to the region.”

Such a track could be pursued at a future date, she added.

For its part, Syria has indicated its belief that Israel will initiate military hostilities. Muhammad Habash, a member of parliament, told Al-Jazeera on May 5 that it was no secret that Syria was “actively” preparing for a military encounter with Israel, which wanted war in order to survive politically.

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