

Peace With Syria? An Israeli Perspective

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De Yossi Alpher

The primary rationale for Israel to seek a peace process with Syria, and for American support that endeavor, is the Iranian threat. This explains why the entire Israeli security community came together more than a year ago to urge a reluctant Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to open a negotiating channel with Syria, and why it will urge new Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu — who pointedly emphasizes the Iranian threat as Israel's main security challenge — to do so as well.

As for Washington, early contacts with Syria by representatives of the Obama Administration point to a possible willingness to sponsor peace talks in accord with the desires of both Jerusalem and Damascus.

That this did not happen during the tenures of Olmert and US President George W. Bush reflects Bush's outright refusal to engage Damascus, due primarily to the Asad regime's support for terrorism and thuggish behavior in Lebanon and Iraq. Thus Olmert, once persuaded of the need to renew peace talks with Syria, turned to a willing Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his government in Ankara.

Turkish interest in shepherding Israeli-Syrian talks during 2008 reflects Turkey's broadly expanded diplomatic grasp under Erdogan. In particular, Turkey now sees itself as a major player in the Middle East. The Turks believe that their mediation effort between Damascus and Jerusalem was successful; they are particularly proud that there were no significant leaks — a sign, they believe, that the parties were serious. Despite the chill introduced to Turkish-Israeli relations by Erdogan's angry reaction to Israel's war on Gaza in early 2009, Turkey hopes to continue playing a role, albeit alongside or just behind the United States, if the Netanyahu government in Israel is willing.

Thus while Ankara remains interested, it seems likely that the talks, if and when renewed, will have Washington "in the room." After all, Syria insists on American auspices, while a US rapprochement with Syria offers Washington obvious benefits in both Iraq and Iran.

Israel, for its part, will want American security guarantees as part of a peace package with Syria. Thus both Israel (assuming Netanyahu chooses to continue) and Syria will ultimately opt for US mediation.

SYRIA SEEN THROUGH THE IRANIAN SECURITY PRISM

Until a few years ago, the prism through which the Israeli security community viewed the country's strategic environment was the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is no longer the case. Today the prism is Iran; it encompasses not only the Iranian nuclear threat but also Tehran's drive for hegemony in the Levant. This is the powerful security rationale for Israel to engage Syria.

Iran's friends in the Levant — Syria, Hizbullah, and Hamas — constitute a key dimension of Tehran's capacity to deter Israel, or for that matter the United States, from attacking its nuclear facilities or even from interfering in its attempts to expand its regional influence (e.g., in Lebanon, the Gulf, or post-withdrawal Iraq) under cover of a growing nuclear capability. As matters stand, Israel has to assume that any attack on Iran or its assets (by anyone) would provoke a major missile and rocket barrage against the entire territory of Israel from Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza.

Hamas' rocket potential is limited, especially after the recent war in Gaza. Iran's capacity to deliver significant payloads to Israel by medium-range missile is also problematic, particularly because of Israel's ability to intercept incoming medium-range missiles. But Syria also has a large arsenal of short-range rockets and missiles, while Hizbullah reportedly has built up an Iranian-supplied arsenal of some 40,000 rockets. Between them, Syria and Hizbullah's rockets and missiles could hit any target in Israel. Moreover, Hizbullah's political control over Lebanon has grown since the summer 2006 war and is likely to expand further if it and its allies win national elections this June. Accordingly, Israel already assumes that any new attacks against it by Hizbullah would provoke a war that engulfs all of Lebanon.

In order for Israel to retain freedom of military and diplomatic maneuver vis á vis Iran, it seeks to neutralize or at least weaken the deterrent threat posed by Iran's allies and

proxies on Israel's borders. The two recent (and highly problematic) wars fought along those borders — against Hizbullah in southern Lebanon in 2006 and Hamas in Gaza this year — must be understood within the context of Israel's drive to prevent encirclement by Iran's allies with their rockets and missiles. This is also the context in which Israel is developing anti-rocket missiles that could eventually be effective against attacks by Hizbullah and Hamas.

From Israel's standpoint, by far the biggest challenge along its borders is Syria, both as a military threat and as Iran's link to Hizbullah and Hamas. Obviously, it makes more sense to neutralize the Syrian challenge diplomatically, if that is feasible, rather than militarily. Of course, even before the threat posed by Iran and its allies became so prominent, Israel sought peace with Syria. Throughout the decade of the 1990s, a succession of five Israeli prime ministers (Yitzhak Shamir, Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Binyamin Netanyahu, and Ehud Barak) engaged in peace negotiations with Damascus, with all but Shamir having the sincere desire to withdraw from the Golan Heights in exchange for security arrangements and even a cold and problematic peace. Today the stakes are far higher: removing Syria from the Iranian military orbit.

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

But this also means that Israel in 2009 will demand more from Syria than it did in the 1990s. And whereas a strict territory-for-peace-and-security deal can fairly easily be divided into short and verifiable phases, this becomes more complicated when factoring in Israel's need to confirm Syrian compliance on issues like reducing its strategic coordination with Iran, cutting ties with Hamas, and severing its arms supply link with Hizbullah. Nor is it certain that Damascus and Jerusalem will be able to agree on these issues — whereas, as President Bashar al-Asad correctly asserts, 80% of the bilateral territorial, diplomatic, and security issues are already agreed. Yet given the Asad regime's negative image and the strategic significance of the Golan Heights, no Israeli government will be able to win the necessary 61-vote majority in the Knesset and, most likely, a popular referendum as well regarding a peace treaty with Syria unless it can

reassure the public that the deal with Damascus also strikes a major blow against Tehran's designs in the Levant.

Incidentally, Hizbullah's possible rise to power in Lebanon may well mean that the old adage that peace with Syria will automatically mean peace with Lebanon no longer holds true. On the other hand, given the level of disappointment in Jerusalem with Beirut's failure over the past 40 years to maintain peace and quiet on Israel's northern border, Israel will have few qualms in granting Syria a degree of hegemony over Lebanon if this can strengthen the deal on Iran-related issues. This is probably the only Syria-related issue-area where the US and Israel might disagree.

Will the new Netanyahu government in Israel pursue peace talks with Syria? Defense Minister Ehud Barak is fairly certain to support the idea. Prime Minister Netanyahu engaged in primarily indirect peace talks with Syria in the late 1990s. Precisely because he has little to offer the Obama Administration in the Palestinian realm, he may recognize an Israeli-Syrian peace track as a way of deflecting Washington's pressures regarding peace-process issues and contributing to its efforts vis á vis Iran, Iraq, and its integrated regional approach to the Middle East. If Netanyahu does reach an agreement with Syria, he will have to deal with internal opposition from Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and other right-wingers in his government. But support from the left would assure him a majority.

Apropos an Israel-Syria peace track, the Sunni Arab core countries may require some coaxing from President Obama to abandon their own hostility toward Syria and welcome an Israel-Syria process. In contrast, the moderate Palestinian camp is already on board: it recognizes that an Israel-Syria deal would weaken its primary rival, Hamas.