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Syria-Israel Talks: High Stakes and Low Expectations

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Following more than a year of behind-the-scenes contacts, on May 21, both Syria and Israel as well as their facilitator Turkey made an identically worded announcement of the resumption of indirect talks between the conflicted parties. Syria, a key actor in major regional conflicts, and Israel, the greatest military power in the Middle East, did not suddenly decide to make peace. Having calculated all pros and cons, they came to the conclusion that indirect talks are what would best serve each of their interests, both internally and internationally. It was pragmatism and cold calculation, as usual. The same guiding principle applies to the continuation and results of the talks. Ultimately, Syria will be interested in sustaining this process as long as there are prospects for American involvement, whereas Israel will seek a more cooperative Syrian role in the region. It remains to be seen whether each party's decision is of a strategic or a tactical character, but it nevertheless marks a conspicuous change in each country's foreign policy. For the most part these changes are driven by the new dynamics in the Middle East: a reshuffling of alliances, a relocation of focal points and a change of tactics. The indirect talks require the EU's participation in order to keep the momentum going until the new American administration decides on the merits of its direct engagement in brokering peace.

The Parties

There were several reasons for Israel to resume contact with the Syrians. First and foremost was the collapse of US policies in the Middle East, notably the war in Iraq and subsequent emergence of Islamist militant groups. This in effect has resulted in the bolstering of Iranian influence to an unprecedented extent, thus allowing for the consolidation of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-Hamas alliance, threatening Israeli positions. The more immediate reason for a change in Israeli foreign policy can be found in the Winograd Report on Israel's unexpected shortcomings revealed during the July 2006 war with Hezbollah. The conflict exposed Israel's *de facto* weakness and propelled certain domestic forces, notably the Israeli defence establishment, and subsequently the prime minister and his circle, to seek diplomatic solutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It became increasingly obvious that given Syria's influence in the region, it would be prudent to approach the regime in Damascus diplomatically. By dropping the precondition that Syria renounce the anti-Israeli regional organisations labelled 'terrorist', a precondition that has thwarted all possibility of talks since 2000, Israel returned to the negotiating principles of the 1990s. This decision was not an easy one since the American administration refused to give the talks any backing. Additionally, the Israeli government's weakened position was apparent, as was the Israeli public's refusal to cede the Golan Heights. And, finally, in the event of failure, all parties were risking even greater turmoil in the region. However, there has been a general consensus across the Israeli political scene that a well-negotiated settlement with the Syrians is in Israel's deep strategic interest.

Having had to withdraw its forces from Lebanon following the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005, Syria found itself in a deadlock—the EU, led by France, and Saudi Arabia contributed to Syria's isolation from the US and Israel. As relations with Russia and Egypt had long since disintegrated, Syria's choice of friends was narrowed down to one—Iran. Syria has capitalised to a certain extent on the 'strategic' relationship with Iran but the growing international pressure on Teheran over its nuclear programme and Israel's possible military plans towards Iran have given the

policy-makers in Damascus a lot to ponder. Even though Bashar al-Asad might not have inherited his father's rare ability to balance conflicting interests, he follows Hafez al-Asad's rule of avoiding excessive dependence on stronger partners, especially when the relationship comes at the cost of Syrian interests. Political isolation has deepened Syria's economic problems—the Syrian state-controlled economy is increasingly stagnant. In addition to soaring prices, the growing budget and trade deficits and the desperate need for direct investment, high-tech supplies and training opportunities, as of 2008 Syria has become a net importer of oil for the first time. The imperative for the liberalisation and opening up of the economy is evident. Syria's economic relations with Iran are disproportionate and insufficient for both Syrian and Iranian needs. Recently there have also been signs of an internal power struggle in Syria, evidenced by the upcoming changes in the cabinet, the assassination of Bashar al-Asad's top military aide, Muhammad Sulayman, and plots targeting the president himself. These events suggest that there might be strong domestic opposition within the establishment to al-Asad's policies, although it is uncertain how it will play in Syrian foreign policy.

Within these circumstances, both countries deemed it beneficial to engage in talks and announce them publicly. The Israeli government saw additional temporary advantages to doing so: making it known that they were willing to talk would exert pressure on the Palestinians and could serve as a makeshift means to divert public opinion from graft allegations against then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. For Syria, who had long voiced its willingness to restart peace talks provided they were based on the Madrid principle of 'land for peace' the announcement that talks would resume was an opportunity to send out a clear signal of a change in its policies. This message was reinforced by Syria's facilitatory role in reaching the Doha agreement, ending the gravest period of the latest Lebanese crisis.

The Stakes

In the event of a peace settlement between Israel and Syria, both sides will have agreed on a number of security arrangements, border issues, normalisation procedures and the water problem. According to senior Syrian and Israeli officials, between 80 and 95 percent of these points, depending on the source, have been agreed upon during the four rounds of talks held since May. The border issue—whether Israel returns the Golan with its June 4, 1967 boundaries, that is, whether Israel complies with the primary Syrian demand, or insists on different boundaries—no longer seems critical. One can assume with a good level of certainty that the Israelis have already pledged their full withdrawal from the Golan or have showed a clear propensity for it. The more so that Syria had previously demonstrated its willingness to secure mutual access to water resources from the Lake of Tiberias, and that Turkey, for its part, is prepared to meet Syria's water needs by sharing its Euphrates resources. The Golan, or parts of it, will most likely become demilitarised in the form of a multinational monitoring security force and a reduced Syrian presence. What is underestimated in the Israeli-Syrian peace agreement is the question of what is at stake in the peaceful coexistence and normalisation of relations. By ending the state of war and exchanging ambassadors, Israel's bordering neighbour will obligatorily, albeit only formally, turn from an adversarial to a 'neutral' state. That notion is of particular import when we address the greater stakes in the Israel-Syria talks.

It is no exaggeration to claim that regional and, to a lesser extent, international stability is at stake in these talks. Even if the recent developments are mere temporary vicissitudes in Syrian and Israeli foreign policies, they can ultimately lead to strategic regional transformations, if properly fostered and directed. The principal objective for Israel (and the Quartet) is to make peace with Syria so as to incorporate Damascus into the West-supported sphere of influence and hence weaken the Syria-Iran alliance—although it must be said that the expectation of a decisive rupture is by all accounts a quixotic one. Syria's relations with Iran, however embellished in their military and economic aspects they may be, have a long history and are indeed politically strategic. Hafez al-Asad boasted of Syria's good relations with the Iranians even at a time when "brotherly" Iraq was fighting with Teheran in the 1980's. Thanks to privileged bonds with Hamas and Hezbollah, both of whom's leadership it hosts in Damascus, Syria has leverage over the Palestinian issue and ubiquitous influence in Lebanon, a country the Syrian regime will not abandon. Yet bilateral relations can be modified, perhaps by shifting the focal point to economic or cultural contacts, if Syrians are convinced that the positive results of such a change will override the negative ones. Israel's target situation is to have the region pacified, with anti-Israeli forces demobilised. Therefore, it cannot demand of Syria that it break off contact with the Iranians, since it is only relatively good Syria-Iran ties that guarantee the Syrians a certain level of control over Hamas and Hezbollah in particular, allowing for the latter's integration into Lebanese political structures. The Syrians have recently explicitly demonstrated how the regional forces can work with them as facilitators rather than spoilers: the Doha agreement, the

ceasefire with Hamas, the Hezbollah prisoner swap and possibly the next prisoner exchange with Hamas, all of which most probably needed or will need Syrian encouragement or approval.

Even though Syria has been anxious to portray its reasons for entering the talks as sheerly a means to reclaiming the Golan, there is much more at stake for Damascus. The Syrian regime has two intertwined guiding principles: ensuring its own survival and reforming on its own terms—objectives based on the Chinese model of reform. To secure the former, Syria needs American assurances, and for the latter, those of the EU and the Arab Gulf countries. Likewise it comes as no surprise that Syria has been anxious for the Americans to mediate the talks—it has predicated any further direct talks with the Israelis on American participation. As the only party in the Barcelona Process that has not yet signed the Association Agreement with the EU, Syria cannot benefit from the privileges that other Mediterranean Arab countries have at their disposal. Approaching the EU is therefore vital to Syria's interests and this can only be achieved through France, which is directly interested in the developments in Lebanon. Syria's rapprochement with France, sealed by reciprocal presidential visits, would not have taken place had it not been for the change of Syria's tactics in Lebanon. By showing greater flexibility in its contacts with Iran, Syria can also regain credibility in Egypt and perhaps Saudi Arabia. Syria, presiding over the Arab League at the moment, might deem it advantageous to seek an improvement of relations with these two key Arab states, thus filling the regional power vacuum that Iran now aspires to occupy.

Good Offices

Turkey has emerged as the leading intermediary in the Israel-Syria indirect talks, although it has to be assumed that once the US chooses to get involved and the parties decide to upgrade the talks to direct negotiations, the Americans will take over the mediation efforts, in accordance with the Madrid principles. Turkish 'mediation' and commitment to the process are symptomatic of Turkey's new regional role as conciliator. Both parties agreed to talk via Ankara's brokers due to Turkey's serious engagement and neutral stance, although the conventional wisdom is that Turkey can exert more pressure on Syria than it can on Israel. Were it not for Turkey's role in solving the water issue, its involvement could have been seen as in fact similar to that of Qatar or Emirates whose good offices were needed only as long as they provided neutral ground for talks. However, in this preliminary phase Turkey could prove quite effective considering its ties with both parties and its broader interest in positioning itself as a 'benign regional power'.

The American administration's involvement is essential for the negotiations to succeed. The US is the sole guarantor of any agreement with Israel and the only power capable of closing the security rift in the overlapping Middle Eastern conflicts. Consequently, in light of what is at stake, the current administration's decision to abstain from any intervention in the negotiations, to continue imposing sanctions on Syria and, at times, to ostentatiously display its rejection of the idea of talks with the Syrians, may come as a surprise. The American official stance, exemplified by George W. Bush's speech in the Knesset in May, shows a significant strategic division between the current US administration and Israel. The Americans appear to be doing their utmost to secure continuation of the Israel-Palestine negotiations. The Syria-Israel track is seen here as a potential obstacle to achieving an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. It's common knowledge that the Bush administration realistically only aims to keep the state of affairs in the Middle East as they are, leaving the Arab world and most likely Israel, anxiously awaiting the next US administration. At the same time, there is a growing awareness in American and international academic, analytical and unofficial diplomatic circles of the importance of engaging Syria. The RAND Corporation, Search for Common Ground and International Crisis Group are among those institutions which have undertaken track II diplomacy efforts, including an exchange of visits. In the end, it will be the next American administration that is going to decide if serious peace negotiations take off.

Given the European Union's special relationship with the region (The Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean) and its historical ties with the Middle East, the level of Europe's political engagement in Syria-Israel talks has so far been inadequate. The EU is vitally interested in the peaceful coexistence of the countries in its vicinity. Looking to curb Iranian influence and safeguard its position in the Middle East, it is an active member of the Quartet, and has important economic ties with the parties. The EU is not a traditional intermediary and suffers from internal divisions, however, what seems to be its weakness might also turn out to be its strength, for the core European countries have distinct interests and capacities with regard to the peace process: (1) France is predominantly concerned with Lebanese affairs, (2) the situation in Iraq is of great importance to the United Kingdom, (3) Spain, Italy and other southern European countries are primarily preoccupied with the economic aspect of relations with the region and (4) Germany's experience in negotiations in the Middle East

might prove invaluable. If the EU is to elevate its position in the Arab world and Israel, it is essential for its national leaders and those representing common institutions to embark on intensive political and economic joint initiatives in and for the Middle East. The time is right—it will take the new American administration about half a year to adjust—for Europe to use its patronage in the interim.

Syrian foreign minister Walid al-Mu'allim has insisted that according to the Madrid principles there should also be a role for Russia in the negotiations. Before the Georgian crisis no one disputed Russia's potentially positive influence on the Syria-Israel talks, at least so far as the Middle East conference planned for November was concerned. Bashar al-Asad's visit to Moscow, scheduled well in advance of the Georgian episode, was aimed at strengthening Syria's position in the region. By looking for new significant partners—Russia and India—Syria may also lessen its dependence on Iran. In the current situation, Russia, the EU and the US cannot and will not allow their dispute to shift to the Middle East.

The Outcome

For the time being, the Syria-Israel indirect talks have brought considerable results for the Syrians and some success for the Israelis. Slowly but steadily Syria's isolation is coming to an end. Israel, although torn by fluctuations on the political scene, is enjoying a period of reasonable calmness. Differences in opinion as to whether either party is serious about the negotiations do not make sense since the decision to talk was itself important and there are external unknowns, such as who will comprise the next American administration and what will develop in the West's relations with Russia, that will influence both parties in the future. Syria and Israel are trying to determine if change by diplomatic means is possible and, if so, what it will lead to. Technically the agreement is reachable within three or four months but setting a timeframe is not as important a factor here as is steering and tracking the dynamics. No agreement is possible in 2008, but the prospective changes in 2009 might yield positive results for the Syria-Israel talks.

The potential obstacles to the process are easily found in the history of the failed Syria-Israel negotiations of 1996 and 2000: ineffective mediation, weak leadership and unrealistic expectations. When, in the negotiating process, there is deep-rooted mistrust and hostility between countries, the *sine qua non* of success is the engagement of a devoted and powerful facilitator. So far the only possible mediator has refused to get involved. Strong leadership from both parties is also required to make peace. On the one hand, Israeli leaders have not been determined enough to convince the nation to support their decisions and more often than not have given in to domestic pressures. First and foremost the next Israeli prime minister, be it Tzipi Livni or even a Likud leader, will have to show great strength in order to make risky decisions and to simultaneously convince the majority of Israelis of the importance of peace with Syria. As of now, it is unknown even who will rule Israel in the near future. And on the other hand, the relatively strong Syrian leadership seems distracted between two schools of foreign policy: the softer-line school of Walid al-Mu'allim—the former ambassador to the US who knows Washington politics like the back of his hand and who looks up to the Libyan model of transformation—and the hardline school of Vice President Faruq al-Shara'. Eventually, Syrian foreign policy will most likely oscillate between the two, leaving in doubt the possibility of the strategic decision to reconcile with Israel. It will not be possible for Syria to reach an agreement with Israel and at the same time maintain its current relations with Iran, a situation the Syrian leadership might determine to be the most beneficial.

The decisive step will have to be taken by the new American administration. Be it Republicans or Democrats—the latter openly voice their intention to renew contact with Syria—the new government will undoubtedly back down from the current administration's attitude. The first American initiatives, however, will come no sooner than mid-2009. Until then, the European Union must take action—not only on behalf of single South European countries, but as a part of the EU's institutional action under the current presidency and subsequent Czech presidency. Europe should do its utmost to ensure that the negotiating process continues, to avoid clashes with Russia over Middle Eastern conflicts, to use its special patronage in economics (for instance, to sign the Association Agreement with Syria, boost trade and promote investment in the region) and to engage in citizen diplomacy. As much as it is a challenge, it is also a chance for Europe to strengthen its presence in the Middle East.