

## **Resolving Israeli-Syrian Tensions**

**By Khody Akhavi | April 30, 2007**

Israel should take advantage of the opportunity to renew peace negotiations with Syria while there is a real chance of success, or risk further destabilizing the Middle East, says a recent report by the International Crisis Group (ICG). The report urges Israel to respond “positively” to Syria’s unconditional offer to resume peace negotiations and to “halt efforts to augment [Israeli] settler presence” in the Golan Heights, in order to revive peace efforts with Syria and pursue enduring normalization with the Arab world.

For most of the past 15 years, peace efforts between Israel and its neighbors have focused primarily on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But Hamas’s electoral victory in 2005 and the West’s subsequent boycott of the Palestinian Authority effectively blocked further progress on that track. Given the current impasse and Syria’s significant influence over Palestinian political affairs, the Israel-Syrian track could provide a better opportunity for engendering peace, according to the report.

The report also said there are could be significant costs if Syria is excluded from the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

“Damascus possesses multiple ways of undermining Israeli-Palestinian talks, whether by encouraging Hamas or Islamic Jihad to resort to violence; vocally criticizing Palestinian concessions; or, in the event of a peace deal, obstructing the holding of the referendum among Palestinian refugees in Syria,” it says.

In 1967, Israel captured the Golan Heights—a 7-kilometer-long strategic plateau—during the Six-Day-War and has occupied it since. There exist some 32 Israeli settlements housing 20,000 people and a similar number of Syrian nationals concentrated in five northern villages throughout the occupied area, according to the report.

The ICG also called on the George W. Bush administration to stop its opposition to negotiations between Israel and Syria. The United States

continues to isolate Syria because of its alleged role as a state sponsor of terrorism and has cut off most high-level contacts with the Syrian government since former Lebanese leader Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in February 2005. A UN prosecutor has implicated Syrian officials in Hariri’s death.

“Although Washington denies it, there is every indication it has signaled to Jerusalem its opposition to resumed negotiations with Damascus which, in its view, Syria would use to break out of isolation, cover up greater intrusion in Lebanese affairs, and shift focus away from the investigation into former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri’s assassination,” said the report.

In early April, *Newsweek* magazine also published reports that Washington pressured Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to continue rebuffing Syria.

“[U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice] argued that talks would amount to a reward for [Syrian President Bashar] al-Assad’s backing of Hezbollah in Lebanon and his ties with Iran,” according to official sources cited by *Newsweek*.

House Speaker Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) visited Damascus in early April to meet al-Assad, in part to identify herself and the opposition Democrats with the findings of Iraq Study Group (ISG), the congressionally appointed panel co-chaired by former Republican Secretary of State James Baker. The ISG’s report, released in December 2006, recommended that Washington

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reach out to Damascus and Tehran for help in stabilizing Iraq.

The Bush administration rejected most of the group's recommendations, and admonished Pelosi for traveling to Damascus. Vice President Dick Cheney went so far as to assail the House Speaker for "bad behavior."

The U.S. stance is not the only obstacle. So far, Israel has conditioned any dialogue with Damascus on sweeping changes to Syria's policy, which means cutting ties to Hamas, halting assistance to Hezbollah, and fundamentally changing the relationship with Iran.

"Hamas and Hezbollah are not mere tools of Syrian policy but they are adept at reading the regional map and would likely adapt their policies in response to signs of a changing Syrian-Israeli relationship," said the ICG report. "The same holds for Iran: Syria would be unlikely to break ties with its closest ally for two decades but Tehran would have to adjust its behavior as it faced the prospect of a peace agreement."

The current Israeli government, unpopular because of its performance in the Lebanon war and discredited because of multiple domestic scandals, lacks the influence to take on the settler lobby, "backed by a public that has grown accustomed to controlling the Golan Heights," according to the report.

Suspicion and distrust toward Syria also remain high because of Syria's continued support of Hezbollah, most recently during the summer war of 2006.

That has not stopped some former Israeli politicians and Syrian businessmen from laying out an unofficial framework for a possible peace agreement between both countries.

In a series of secret meetings between September 2004 and July 2006, Israelis, led by Alon Liel, former head of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Syrians, led by Syrian-American businessman Ibrahim Soliman, recommended that Israel withdraw from the Golan Heights to its pre-1967 borders in exchange for Syria's agreement to stop supporting Hamas and Hezbollah, distance itself from Iran, and make efforts to stabilize Iraq.

"Bashar wants to see the Golan returned to Syria, and he's genuinely prepared to make peace with Israel to get it back," said Soliman, as quoted in *Newsweek*.

"In today's Israeli political scene, it is possible for a Prime Minister to stand up and say: 'I'm going to test the Syria option and see if Assad is ready to make a deal'," Liel told an Israeli Policy Forum audience. "The 'Golan lobby' that will resist a deal with Syria is not as overpowering as everyone thinks."

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*Khody Akhavi writes for the Inter Press Service.*

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