

## Chapter 7

# Sort of Want to, but not Really: Israeli-Syrian Relations in 2007

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### **Looking Back**

On the surface, Israel-Syria relations did not witness significant developments in 2007. The peace talks were not renewed, the Golan Heights remained in Israeli hands, and despite a certain degree of tension following the Israeli attack in Syria in September, relative calm was maintained between the two countries. Nevertheless, there were a number of important developments, primarily outgrowths of the Second Lebanon War. Syria sensed in Israel's embarrassment regarding the war both an opportunity and a risk. On the one hand, it believed that the failure would prompt Israel to take aggressive action, possibly even against Syria, in an attempt to erase the disgrace. On the other hand, the situation was also viewed as an opportunity to renew the peace process. Thus throughout 2007, Israeli-Syrian relations spanned two tracks: calls for a renewal of the political process, and military tension between the two countries. This tension was fueled by belligerent rhetoric and military buildups on the part of both countries.

In December 2006, the Baker-Hamilton report on US policy in the Middle East was submitted to President Bush. The report's recommendations included attempting to renew direct talks between

Israel and Syria as part of efforts to achieve a total solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. After the report was released, Damascus embarked on what various commentators called “a peace offensive,” ostensibly designed to restart negotiations between Israel and Syria. In an interview to the Lebanese *Daily Star* newspaper, the Syrian foreign minister called for a renewal of talks without preconditions. Syrian President Bashar al-Asad went even further and challenged Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to call the Syrians’ bluff. Various messages were apparently conveyed secretly in December 2006 via European channels and US Senator Arlen Specter. Moreover, in the middle of January 2007, presumably with deliberate timing, a report surfaced regarding clandestine unofficial talks that had been underway for around two years between Alon Liel (a former director general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Ibrahim Suleiman (a Syrian businessman who is close to the Asad family). Asad’s regime and then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, it was reported, were aware of the talks, which formulated understandings for an outline of a peace agreement.

While Washington and Israel rejected Syria’s advances on various grounds, the diplomatic activity continued, though without achieving any significant results. In April 2007, Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi relayed a number of messages to both sides. The Turks, it was later apparent, were also involved that month in mediation efforts between Asad and Olmert, and through them, the Israeli prime minister tried to clarify Syrian intentions. The Turkish involvement continued at one level or another in the months that followed. Meanwhile, diplomatic messages were also relayed between Israel and Syria by other parties, such as Michael Williams, the UN emissary to the Middle East, and by the Spanish foreign minister, Miguel Moratinos. It seems that these indirect contacts served a number of purposes for both sides. First, they probed each side’s willingness to start talks. Second, considering Olmert’s political constraints, Asad’s suspicion of Israel’s intentions, and the lack of US enthusiasm over renewing the process, it seems that both

sides sought to discover what they could, in principle, achieve from the negotiating process. Ultimately these indirect contacts allowed the two leaders to demonstrate diplomatic activity, each for his own agenda: Asad, in view of the external pressure exerted on his regime, and Olmert, because of the internal criticism and the need to create a new diplomatic agenda following the disintegration of the convergence plan and the ongoing political stagnation regarding the Palestinian issue.

Alongside the faltering diplomatic course, military tension between the two countries increased, probably resulting from the IDF's intensive military buildup aimed at improving its operational readiness in the wake of the Second Lebanon War. To this end, a "working premise," as defined by a senior officer in the north, was adopted by the military regarding the possibility of a war erupting between Israel and Syria in the summer of 2007. The IDF doubled its forces on Mount Hermon, increased the number of exercises by regular and reserve troops, and conducted several high profile maneuvers, one even incorporating an exercise that involved capturing a model of a Syrian village.

The IDF activity was underscored by official Israel statements. For example, IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi said in June 2007: "We are prepared for the possibility of deterioration in the Palestinian arena as well as in the north. We are definitely preparing for such an eventuality. I hope we only have to drill, but if not, we must be ready." Israeli intelligence figures cautioned in public against the danger of escalation as a result of the Syrians misinterpreting Israeli intentions, and also against the possibility that Asad was actually planning to carry out a limited lightning offensive on the Golan Heights, aimed at jumpstarting the political process. The head of IDF Military Intelligence reported in the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that the Syrians "are displaying greater readiness for war than ever before." It was also later reported that a special ministerial committee discussed the possibility of escalation on the northern front. The mood in Israel was accurately captured by

a senior military commentator, who said that the IDF had started the countdown toward the next war with Syria.

On the Syrian side of the border, Israel's behavior was interpreted as possible preparation for war. The Syrians' assessment that Israel was liable to try to cover up its military failure in Lebanon with another "escapade," as Bashar al-Asad put it, only worsened the situation. Asad himself explained to the newspaper *al-Khayat* in April that "we don't know if there will be another war, but we cannot rule out the possibility," and added that "Israel does not have any insurance policy." In addition to belligerent statements, the Syrian army, according to Israeli sources, began to beef up its deployment on the Golan Heights. The frontline units were trained, the military arrays on the front were bolstered, entrenched defenses were enhanced, and heavy rockets were advanced close to the Israeli border. Meanwhile, the Syrian army received a number of modern weapon systems, including new anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles and more accurate surface-to-surface rockets and missiles.

Tension between Syria and Israel reached new heights following September 6, 2007, when Israel Air Force jets attacked a target in northern Syria labeled by the *New York Times* as a nuclear facility. Shortly after that, the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Jarida* reported that people close to the Syrian president were urging him to respond to the Israeli attack with military means. The newspaper also noted that the Syrian army had launched a partial mobilization of the reserve forces. However, Asad himself relieved some of the tension when he explained in a BBC interview that "Retaliate doesn't mean missile for missile and bomb for bomb. We have our means to retaliate, maybe politically, maybe in other ways."

Indeed, within a relatively short period the tension began to lessen and was replaced by diplomatic contacts regarding the Annapolis summit. The United States wanted the summit to be a success and hoped the Syrians would attend the regional meeting. At the same time, an Arab consensus formed regarding the planned summit and the need for the Syrians to participate. Syria saw this event as an opportunity to

moderate its regional isolation and cooperated in the diplomatic game that developed around its participation in the summit. This activity helped remove the idea of an Israeli-Syrian confrontation from the agenda, and towards the end of the year relations between the two states returned to a calmer level. On the other hand, despite Syria's attendance at the Annapolis regional summit, the peace process with Israel was not revived. Syrian spokesmen, including the president himself, called for negotiations to be resumed, but their calls were once again rejected both by Jerusalem and by Washington.

### **Looking Ahead**

Israel's and Syria's policies vis-à-vis one another are a function of the interplay between three main arenas: the domestic arena, the regional arena, and the international arena. On the international and regional levels, the US plays a central role, in terms of its influence over the parties' agendas and its ability to promote different processes that impact both on Syria and on Israel. Since 2002 and even more so since the American invasion of Iraq, the Syrian-Israeli conflict has been perceived by Washington in a wider context rather than simply a territorial dispute between two enemy states. Syria was defined as a major obstacle to the United States' democracy campaign in the Middle East because it allegedly provides refuge for the leaderships of the Palestinian terror organizations, gives active support to Hizbollah, allows terrorists passage into Iraq, and generates instability in Lebanon. The strong pact between it and Iran only serves to enhance this perception. It is no wonder, then, that President Bush, in an undiplomatic statement at the end of 2007, declared that his patience with the Syrian president had "long since run out." In recent years, the United States has maintained a policy aimed at isolating the Syrian regime and preventing it from gaining international legitimacy. In this respect, renewed peace talks between Israel and Syria are viewed by the US as an unmerited reward for Bashar al-Asad and a sort of insurance policy for his regime. Moreover, successful completion of negotiations will ostensibly bring with it additional benefits for

the Syrian regime, including enhanced relations with the United States, economic aid, and an influx of foreign investments. All these would be accompanied by the historic achievement of the recovery of the Golan Heights. It appears that with regard to the current US administration, these are untenable conditions, at least as long as Bashar al-Asad maintains his current regional policy.

The Bush administration's approach to Syria directly influenced the Israeli government's openness (or lack thereof) to Syria's advances, and provided Olmert with a convenient pretext for rejecting Asad's calls for peace. Nevertheless, the Israeli picture is somewhat more complex. It is reasonable to assume that the Israeli prime minister was looking to avoid a clash with the Bush administration, certainly when the struggle over the Iranian nuclear project tops Israel's priorities. As Olmert explained in December 2006, "When the entire international community is demanding that Damascus stop courting war, and the United States president, George Bush, is fighting against parties in all arenas who are trying to block American policy – is this the time to say otherwise?" Besides the issue of relations with the United States, domestic politics were an important consideration for the government, and Prime Minister Olmert, who since the Second Lebanon War has devoted much of his efforts to political survival, was wary of opening up a new point of domestic contention. The departure of the Israel Beteinu party from the government and threats by the Shas party to follow suit against a background of renewed talks with the Palestinians underscore that Olmert's coalition is not able to engage in talks with Syria, certainly when Damascus's price tag – return of the Golan Heights to Syrian sovereignty – is known from the start.

Olmert's coalition calculations are probably reinforced by public opinion. According to a survey in late 2006, 57 percent of the public was interested in starting negotiations but 54 percent was not willing to meet Syria's price. Moreover, the debate in the Israeli defense establishment between the IDF and the Mossad regarding Asad's intentions made it easier for Olmert to reject the Syrian president's

calls for peace. While Damascus's war rhetoric may have served as an incentive to explore the Syrian channel, the absence of any Syrian response to Israel's attack in September seemed to undermine the seriousness of the threat, or the need to forestall it by diplomatic means. Without an external incentive (US pressure or the danger of war), supportive domestic pressure, and a stable coalition, the Israeli government will probably continue to proffer excuses for deferring negotiations on the Syrian channel. Moreover, renewed peace talks with the Palestinians allow the Olmert government to demonstrate political activity to both domestic and foreign audiences and to continue claiming that it is not possible to make progress on the Syrian track and the Palestinian track at the same time.

For its part, Syria has several incentives to start peace talks with Israel. First and foremost is the regime's drive to ensure its survival. Damascus perceives the United States and France as trying to undermine Asad's regime, and Israel is deemed an extension of the United States. Taken together with Syria's concern that war might break out, renewal of diplomatic contacts with Israel would relieve Syrian distress in this area. The incentive relating to the regime's survival also has an economic dimension. In order to achieve sustainable growth, the Syrian economy needs foreign investments as well as international relief. These are unlikely to materialize in view of the American economic sanctions and the tension that exists between Syria and Western countries. Moreover, in addition to the drive to achieve economic prosperity, the Syrian regime is concerned over the decline in the country's oil reserves. According to the International Monetary Fund's forecast, this will force it to import large quantities of oil, for which the regime will need foreign currency. The significance of this is clear to the Syrians. As noted by a European mediator, the Alawi regime understands that in order to survive it has to attract foreign capital to Syria, and that no sane business will invest its capital in a country that does not live in peace with its neighbors.

To this can be added Asad's regional considerations. Starting talks with Israel will help the Syrian regime end the relative isolation it has experienced in recent years in the Arab world due to its policy in Lebanon and its close ties with Shiite Iran. Asad has taken a number of steps in recent years that harmed his relations with Arab leaders. The assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, attributed to Syria, damaged relations with Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah was a personal friend of Hariri, and Asad's refusal to cooperate with the international committee of inquiry set up after the murder sharpened the bitterness felt in Riyadh. Asad's strident address at the end of the Second Lebanon War, in which he condemned leaders of Arab countries for not supporting Hizbollah and scoffed at their being "half men," added to the bad blood. The insult quickly became a diplomatic thorn when Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan cooled their relations with Damascus. Starting negotiations with Israel could provide an antidote and restore Syria to the heart of the Arab consensus. The economic and political dividends to be gained from such a situation are clear and might include generous Arab aid, as well as recognition of Syria's status in Lebanon.

Finally, there remains the matter of preconditions for negotiations. At times it appeared that this issue alone prevented a renewal of contacts, and on this matter, Syria has vacillated over the year between two extremes. On the one hand, at the end of 2006, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mualem announced that "genuine and serious dialogue must start without any preconditions." On the other hand, President Asad made renewal of talks contingent on guarantees that the Golan Heights would be returned in their entirety to Syria. For the Syrians, it is clear that the mere renewal of negotiations would be an achievement in itself and could produce immediate returns. At the same time, the end result is also largely clear – Israeli withdrawal from most if not all of the Golan Heights. This price is clear to Israel as well, and thus it appears that insistence on receiving guarantees on the Golan Heights is no more than a political tactic.

The Israeli government has also set conditions for renewing contacts, principally an end to Syrian aid to Hizbollah, severance of ties with Iran, and expulsion of the Palestinian terrorist headquarters from Damascus. The American administration, for its part, added the closure of the border with Iraq and an end to Syrian involvement in Lebanese politics. All these, however, are serious assets for Syria. The pact with Iran, even though sometimes viewed by commentators as a tactical need, is a substantial element of Syria's national security approach. Without Soviet backing, Iran acts as a main ally and provides Syria with strategic depth. Syria largely views Lebanon as historic Syrian property, and sponsoring Palestinian organizations in Damascus is seen by Syria as both a means of exerting regional influence and as a national asset, a "last refuge of Arabism." Thus, in Syria's eyes, resolving these issues represents an integral part of the negotiations process. In this regard, the Israel-Syria conflict does not only revolve around the question of control of the Golan Heights but is joined by a set of other substantial issues. This perspective is also clear to Washington and Jerusalem. Therefore, presenting major preconditions to negotiations is nothing more than a diplomatic means of rejecting the Syrians. If the current or next US administration decides to re-examine the matter of relations with Syria, and if the present or next Israeli prime minister takes a strategic decision to make peace with Syria, it is likely that these conditions will be moderated and will become a less serious obstacle to starting serious peace talks. Until then, it appears that Israeli-Syrian relations are fated to fluctuate between calls for peace and threats of war.