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## Israel-Syria Negotiations: A Real Possibility?

**Shlomo Brom**

Over the past few months, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has made a number of overtures for renewing Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations. These have, on the whole, been received coolly by Israel and the United States. The aim of this essay is to analyze the processes that resulted in the Syrian initiative, and Israel's possible responses.

Current relations within the Israel-Syria-Lebanon triangle have been shaped over the past four years by three main events. These events, in chronological order and not necessarily in order of importance, are:

- Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon (May 2000)
- The second Palestinian intifada (erupted late September 2000)
- The aftermath of September 11, 2001, most importantly, the war in Iraq

The impact of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon on Israel's relations with Syria and Lebanon was for the most part positive for Israel. The withdrawal punctured Hizbollah's domestic and international legitimacy, and casting operations against Israel as a national struggle of liberation against a foreign occupier became an obsolete pretext. The Lebanese public, which now enjoys peace, stability, and relative economic growth after years of civil war and conflict with Israel, does not support continuing the violent struggle against Israel. The international community recognizes the current border between Lebanon and Israel, and therefore does not see it as justification for military conflict. Hizbollah clung to the issues of Shab'a Farms (Har Dov) and the prisoners held by Israel as weak excuses for continuing its operations, and it recently lost the prisoners pretext in the Hizbollah-Israel prisoner swap. The waning legitimacy of Hizbollah operations has been manifested by their

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## Israel-Syria Negotiations – cont.

limited scope and the ability of Israel and the international community to restrain the organization when it seems on the verge of escalation.

The Israeli withdrawal thus put Syria and Hizbollah in a difficult position. Syria lost its only leverage for pressuring Israel into negotiations aimed at returning the Golan Heights to Syrian sovereignty, and Hizbollah, to a great extent, lost its *raison d'être*. Once Hizbollah ceases as the Lebanese opposition movement to the Israeli occupation, it becomes a mere political faction representing the interests of only one sector of the Lebanese population, the Shiites, in which it has to compete with other political factions such as Amal. As such, the Israeli withdrawal threatened to transform Hizbollah into just one more interest group out of the many in Lebanon.

In some ways, the outbreak of the second intifada a few months following the withdrawal was a welcome development for Syria and Hizbollah. The nationalist response elicited by the intifada in the Arab world furnished them with momentum and opportunities to achieve their own goals and to apply pressure on Israel. Syria was able to increase pressure on Israel by supporting Palestinian organizations in general and Islamic groups like Hizbollah and Islamic Jihad in particular, by permitting them to locate their headquarters in Damascus, undergo training on Syrian and Lebanese soil, and smuggle instructions and weapons to the Palestinians. Syria also facilitates the transfer of Iranian aid to Palestinian

groups in the form of funds and weapons.

For its part, Hizbollah has been able to continue its operations against Israel and thus demonstrate its ideological uniqueness in comparison to other groups in Lebanon. It assisted Palestinian terrorist groups and attempted to build its own terrorist infrastructure within the Palestinian territories. Paradoxically, Hizbollah has been able to operate largely by

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exploiting the weakened state of the Palestinian secular Fatah movement and its disintegration into local violent gangs. Hizbollah assumed control of some of these groups and directed their operations, mainly through the provision of financial aid. In their contribution to the Palestinian cause, therefore, both Syria and Hizballah have remained "relevant."

The events of September 11 created new difficulties for Syria and Hizbollah. Because Hizbollah is an Islamic terrorist group with a history of bitter attacks against the United States and an international terrorist infrastructure that has been activated

on a number of occasions, the organization was liable to become a target of the United States war on terrorism. For its part, Syria possessed all the characteristics of a full-fledged member of the axis of evil: it supported terrorism, it is ruled by an oppressive authoritarian regime, and it possessed the ability to produce weapons of mass destruction. The only reason the United States did not brand Syria as a member was that the administration concluded that in contrast to other axis states, it could develop cooperative relations with Syria and influence its behavior, as it had in 1991 during the Gulf War. After September 11 Syria had a strong interest in not being identified with al-Qaeda and the axis of evil, and therefore cooperated with the United States in its campaign against al-Qaeda.

This coordinated effort was disrupted by the war in Iraq. Prior to the war, Bashar al-Assad made efforts to improve Syrian-Iraqi relations. He did not dwell on the problematic relations with Saddam Hussein that his father had experienced, but rather assessed that improved relations with Iraq would be strategically and financially beneficial. Iraq could serve as a strategic rear for isolated Syria, and economic relations with Iraq could improve the dismal state of the Syrian economy. Bashar permitted Iraq to export oil via Syria in violation of the UN resolution on food for oil in return for high financial compensation. He also allowed weapons to be smuggled into Iraq through Syria before the war, and during the hostilities he allowed Arab volunteers to cross the border

into Iraq in order to take part in the war against the United States. At the end of the war, he provided refuge in Syria for members of the toppled regime, and there is an unsubstantiated suspicion that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction were smuggled into Syria and hidden there.

The outcome of the war injured Syria's already dismal strategic position, which had been declining steadily for decades. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Syria lost its superpower benefactor. Its strategic balance with Israel worsened consistently, its economy deteriorated, and it suffered from strategic isolation. With the war in Iraq, Syria lost its hope of acquiring the strategic rear that Iraq could provide. And, due to its actions before and during the war, Syria became a target of the ire of the one major superpower, the United States, which now had forces deployed in neighboring countries.

Bashar al-Assad understands that his relations with the United States have become problematic to the point of constituting a strategic threat to his regime. He is now searching for ways to appease the United States. In response to American pressure, he announced the closure of the headquarters of Palestinian terrorist groups in Damascus and simultaneously began expressing his desire to renew peace negotiations with Israel. This overture was highlighted by hints dropped by the Syrian ambassador in the United States that Assad was willing to renew negotiations even if Israel did not accept his condition of starting negotiations at the point where they broke off

during President Hafez al-Assad's meeting with President Clinton in Geneva in 2000.

### **Genuinely Interested Parties?**

Assessing the prospects for renewed Syrian-Israeli negotiations and their possible positive outcome requires examining the positions and actions of both parties. The key question on the Syrian side is whether Bashar al-Assad is capable of making decisions in general, particularly decisions that deviate from the positions of his father. Bashar is surrounded, if not controlled, by the old guard of his father's regime. Up to now, none of his promises for change or reform have been fulfilled. Internal reforms were halted when a number of expressions of freedom of speech and political organization displeased the old guard. His commitment to close the terrorist headquarters turned out to be an empty promise. Aside from instructing activists of these organizations to stop making public appearances, there has been no change in the operations of these groups in Damascus. The United States suspects that Syria is not fully cooperating in preventing aid from reaching the forces waging a terrorist war against coalition forces in Iraq. Added to these questions are Bashar's own positions on Israel, as there is no indication that they differ in any way from those of his father. It can even be argued that his attitude towards Israel is more negative, and this is manifested in his scathing anti-Israel statements and his warm relationship with Hizbollah.

On the Israeli side, there is no serious desire to renew negotiations with Syria. Two types of arguments emerged in Israel against responding to Bashar's overtures. The first argument held that the overtures were not sincere – that Bashar was not genuinely interested in reaching an agreement, but rather in pleasing the United States and reducing American pressure on him. There is no reason for Israel to cooperate and help Bashar rid himself of American pressure, this argument reasoned. Instead, Israel should wait for continued American pressure to effect a change in Syria's behavior regarding terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. The second argument was that the Israeli government could not manage a Palestinian track and a Syrian track simultaneously. The Israeli-Palestinian track has become a political strain on the government, particularly since the prime minister declared his intention of implementing a unilateral withdrawal, and proponents of this argument held that the government could not handle additional pressure. To be sure, there were other voices in the Israeli camp, and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom expressed interest in assessing Syria's intentions. Overall, however, the consensus supported not responding to the Syrian overtures.

As far as Israel is concerned, the crux is the nature of Israel's goals in relation to Syria. Negotiations with Syria under Rabin, Netanyahu, and Barak made clear that peace with Syria could not be reached without giving up the Golan Heights. If



Israel's primary goal is to retain sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a strategy of refraining from any action that might undermine its hold over the Golan (like negotiating with Syria) is justified. Such a strategy would also involve simultaneous efforts to minimize Syria's ability to pressure Israel and cause it damage, with the hope that, in the long run, Syria would become accustomed and reconcile itself to Israeli control of the Golan Heights. Of course, there has been no indication of this possible Syrian reconciliation, and even if it did occur, it would be many years in coming. In any case, Syria's current position allows Israel to pursue this strategy and shun Syria's new peace overtures, benefiting instead from the American pressure to motivate Syria to change its behavior in the realms of terrorism against Israel and developing weapons of mass destruction.

However, the situation is more complex if Israel's goal is to reach a peace agreement with Syria. If this is the case, the first argument against renewing negotiations with Syria cannot be taken seriously, as it necessarily rules out negotiations with all Arab countries. In all cases so far, negotiations between Israel and an Arab state did not result from that country's sudden decision to support the existence of Israel or recognize the just nature of the Zionist movement, but rather from its conclusion that direct negotiations with Israel would serve its strategic interests. For example, Sadat came to the conclusion that Egypt had an interest in changing its orientation and moving closer to the United

States, and that the fast track for doing so was through peace with Israel. Indeed, in many parts of the world, it is believed that the road to Washington runs via Jerusalem. Whether or not this is true, this belief serves Israel's interests and furnishes various opportunities. Previous governments succeeded in using these opportunities to conclude peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan.

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In the present case, the questions are more tactical: what is the correct timing for renewing negotiations? Will negotiations have a better chance of succeeding if Israel waits until American pressure brings about a change in Syria's behavior? Will renewing negotiations decrease the chances of changing Syria's behavior? Is there any point in reaching an agreement with a weakened regime?

Syria, however, is not Libya, and we can therefore expect American pressure to bring about no more than cosmetic changes in Syrian behavior. The only way to bring about a fundamental change in Syria's actions towards Israel is through negotiations

and a peace treaty. If this premise is correct, there is good reason to issue a positive response to Syria's overtures in order to assess whether it is possible to reach an agreement with Bashar al-Assad. It must also be remembered that the potential damage stemming from a decrease in pressure on Syria is small. In addition, the weakening of Bashar's regime creates an opportunity to begin negotiations under better conditions. There is no guarantee that it will be easier to reach an agreement with another regime that may replace the present one, and it is preferable that regime change take place after peace with Israel is a fait accompli, when making any change to it will carry a price.

As for the second argument, it is true that conducting dual-track negotiations puts organizational and political strain on the government, but the burden is only seriously felt when decisions need to be made and implemented on both tracks simultaneously. The prime minister has a large degree of control over the pace of decision-making, and he can therefore time decisions according to his own political timetable. Furthermore, in actuality, negotiations are not taking place on the Palestinian track. Decisions are unilateral, and their timing is determined entirely by the prime minister. The prime minister would also be able to control the rate of progress on the Syrian track, if it is renewed.

Moreover, working on two tracks at once offers some advantages. It creates a dynamic between the two tracks, with developments on one

track affecting developments on the other. It also presents some advantages with regard to Israeli public opinion. Negotiating simultaneously on two tracks allows decision-makers to broadcast the vision of comprehensive peace with the entire Arab world once again. It can be explained to the public that peace with Syria would isolate the Palestinians and make them easier to handle.

Analysis therefore suggests that Israel's cool response to recent Syrian overtures reflects the government's lack of desire for a peace treaty with Syria. The government is aware of the

fact that an agreement with Syria is unattainable without giving up the Golan Heights. It does not want to pay this price when there is no palpable pressure on Israel to do so, since the northern border is relatively quiet, Hizbollah attacks are limited and tolerable, and it is calm along the Golan Heights. The government also does not believe that reaching a comprehensive agreement with the Arab world is possible, particularly as long as the confrontation with the Palestinians – which it views as beyond resolution – continues. For this reason, there is no enticing element serving

to balance the cost of giving up the Golan Heights.

In the short run the cool response will not exact any real price from Israel because of the weakened position of Syria, other than continued Syrian motivation to support Hizbollah and Palestinian terrorist groups. The problem, however, is that such a policy on the part of the Israeli government strengthens the widely held view in the region that only the use of violence can motivate Israel to undertake the steps required for reaching peace agreements with the Arab states.

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