

Syrian–Israeli Peace: A Possible Key to Regional Change

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SUMMARY

- Peace between Syria and Israel is a real possibility—it was almost achieved twice before in 1995–1996 and 1999–2000.
- Both sides have indicated their interest through indirect talks hosted by Turkey.
- Syrian–Israeli peace would have positive effects on U.S. interests in the Middle East, including Lebanon, Iraq, and other tracks of the Arab–Israeli peace process.
- The downsides of U.S. mediation are limited.
- The two sides cannot and will not reach a peace treaty without U.S. leadership.
- The Obama administration should develop an integrated policy including pressure, incentives, and robust diplomacy to make this possibility a reality.
- The pressure would be to keep Syria out of Lebanon and Iraq. This would mean continued support for UN Security Council resolutions on Lebanon and the International Hariri Tribunal, as well as continued U.S. sanctions as long as Syria violates its neighbors' sovereignty.
- The incentives should include the return of the Golan Heights, ending Syria's political isolation, U.S. help in securing World Trade Organization accession, and encouraging foreign direct investment.

There is a real opportunity for peace between Syria and Israel. The two countries almost reached an agreement twice before, during U.S.-mediated talks in 1995–1996 and 1999–2000. Recently, they have been conducting indirect peace negotiations under Turkish auspices and both sides have expressed a need for U.S. mediation to take the talks to the next level. Although there is no guarantee of success, a Syrian–Israeli peace accord would have very significant benefits—for the two countries themselves, and also for Lebanon, Iraq, and

the possibility of Israeli–Lebanese and Israeli–Palestinian peace, and in curbing Iran's influence in the region. It would also help open the way for activating the Arab peace initiative launched in 2002, and for contemplating a general peace between Israel and the countries of the Arab League. Any and all of these potential outcomes would be in the interest of the United States. The George W. Bush administration declined to mediate the Syrian–Israeli peace talks. For the incoming Barack Obama administration, a Syrian–Israeli peace accord



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would be an important breakthrough in the Middle East. The new administration thus needs to develop a balanced approach combining pressure, incentives, and diplomacy to make this peace possible.

Syrian and Israeli Interests in a Peace Treaty

For Syria, regaining the Golan Heights has been a key goal for decades. The Golan Heights were lost under Hafez Assad's watch in 1967, when he was defense minister, and their loss has remained a stain on the regime and the family. To get them back, Hafez Assad tried direct war, proxy war, and negotiations. In 1973, he joined Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in a direct war against Israel to force Israel's hand. Through daring diplomacy in subsequent years, Sadat regained the Sinai Peninsula; but Syria ended up losing the Golan Heights to Israeli annexation in 1981. Stymied in direct war, Syria pursued indirect war against Israel, initially by supporting the Palestine Liberation Organization in Lebanon, and after 1982 by supporting Hezbollah. Syria hoped that these direct and indirect wars might help push Israel back to the negotiating table.

In his eight years as Syrian president, Bashar Assad, Hafez's son, has not strayed far from his father's strategy; he has continued to pursue proxy pressure against Israel while pushing for a resumption of negotiations with Israel. Within this overall strategy, however, Bashar's regime has managed Syria's fortunes poorly. Syria was pushed out of Lebanon in 2005, became isolated regionally and internationally, and came under UN investigation for its possible involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri and other Lebanese figures. Bashar ruined the intricate alliance system that Hafez had painstakingly constructed, in which an alliance with Iran was complemented with good relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as well as with Europe and the United States. Bashar has squandered many of these relationships and left Syria dangerously overdependent on

Iran. But Iran cannot help Syria get the Golan Heights back nor guarantee the regime's long-term security. And Syria cannot sustain the intensely confrontational anti-American foreign policy that oil-rich states like Iran or Venezuela can afford.

Events in Syria's region have also made it more vulnerable. The U.S. military, once half a world away, now patrols Syria's border with Iraq. U.S. bluster about regime change in Damascus, after its toppling of the Baathist regime in Baghdad in 2003, rattled the Syrian power structure. Although Washington later stepped back from this regime change rhetoric, the Israeli attack on an alleged nuclear site in September 2007 and the U.S. helicopter raid into northeastern Syria in October 2008 have underscored Syria's continuing strategic vulnerability.

Instability in Iraq has also been a cause for serious Syrian concern, although Damascus has contributed to this by allowing radicals to transit through the country to join the insurgency. Kurdish autonomy—indeed, proto-statehood—in northern Iraq threatens to stir up rebellious tendencies among Syria's own two million Kurds. Sectarian fighting between Sunna and Shi'a in Iraq, and similar tensions in Lebanon, risk worsening relations between Syria's Sunni majority and the dominant Alawi minority. The Islamization of politics among Sunna and Shi'a in Iraq and around the region, amid growing signs of—so far nonpolitical—Islamism in Syria, also threatens the legitimacy of the secular Baathist regime in Syria.

Moreover, the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah also hurt Syria's position. Although Hezbollah claimed victory, the war had a negative impact on its ability to resume anti-Israeli operations. Hezbollah was pushed out of its main zone of operations along the Israeli border, and tension between it and Israel reached such a level that any further operation would trigger another massive response from Israel. Thus, for Syria, Hezbollah's function as a harassing force against Israel—a role it had played for two decades—ended in the sum-

mer of 2006. It remains as a deterrent force in case of all-out war with Israel but can no longer engage in low-level warfare.

For all these reasons, Bashar Assad is potentially more in need of a breakthrough with Israel than his father was. For Syria, the benefits of a peace treaty with Israel would be significant. The return of the Golan Heights to Syria would be—and would be promoted as—a historic political and strategic achievement. Bashar would have secured what even his father could not. The Syrian leadership could also expect to reinforce regime security through a peace treaty with Israel. Although Israel has already long been protective of the regime in Syria, preferring it to a radical Islamist alternative, the Syrian leadership can expect that if and when it signs a peace accord with Israel, it will join the club of those authoritarian Arab regimes that are also regarded protectively by the United States. Having recently gone through a regime change scare, and facing an uncertain future, the Syrian regime considers its long-term security a key issue.

The issue of the UN tribunal investigating the Hariri assassination is also relevant. Although little is publicly known about what the tribunal has discovered thus far, there is significant concern in Syria about the possibility that it might indict senior officials. Whatever the investigation concludes about Syrian links to the Hariri, and other, assassinations, Bashar knows that he will be better off if his government is engaged in serious peace talks with Israel—or has signed an actual treaty—when the tribunal finally begins its hearings.

Syria could also expect economic dividends from a peace treaty. Especially under U.S. stewardship, a treaty would largely end Syria's isolation from the Arab world and the international community, opening the doors for greater Arab and international investment. Syria's isolation has thwarted its attempts to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union, join the World Trade Organization, and attract large-scale foreign investment. Although Turkey, Iran, Malaysia,

China, and other nations can help mitigate Syria's economic woes, it would take a change in U.S. policy to fully open the gates for Arab and global investment. And with its large, impoverished population and a significant manufacturing and trading potential still unrealized, Syria badly needs such investment.

For Israel, a peace treaty with Syria would also have numerous benefits. First, a peace ac-

U.S. interests in the Middle East include a more stable Iraq, a weaker Iran, progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process, a stable Lebanon, a weaker Hizbollah, a weaker Jihadi movement, and an improved American image. Peace between Syria and Israel would have a positive impact on them all.

cord with Syria would neutralize Israel's last significant Arab state opponent—given the achievement of peace with Egypt and Jordan, and the United States' removal of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. A Syrian-Israeli peace accord would also put pressure on Lebanon to negotiate a peace treaty with Israel. An accord would greatly narrow the strategic options for both Hizbollah and Hamas. It would open the way for relaunching the Arab peace initiative aimed at establishing peace between Israel and all the Arab countries. And it would weaken Iran's influence in this part of the Middle East—Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Finally, peace with Syria would be even more valuable to Israel today than it would have been in 1996 or 2000, when an agreement was almost reached, because Iran, Hizbollah, and Hamas have since all become more intractable threats—which could be reduced if a breakthrough is achieved with Syria.

Though most Israelis do not deny the value of peace with Syria, they doubt Syria's sincerity in seeking to reach it. They see that Syria supports Hizbollah, Hamas, and Iraqi insurgents and that it is allied with Iran—all forces that oppose peace with Israel—and thus they conclude that Syria cannot be serious about peace. They see how Syria has treated Lebanon

and thus surmise that Syria cannot be a good neighbor. They fear a land-for-peace deal that will leave them without the Golan Heights but also with no assurances that Syria will change its policies. Israelis have argued that Syria must give up its hard-line alliances before peace can be considered. Syria, conversely, has argued that if it had not developed these alliances, Israel would be happily maintaining its annexation of the Golan and would never think of coming to the negotiating table.

Most Israeli prime ministers since Yitzhak Rabin have actively explored peace with Syria (see box). These efforts reflect the fact that despite some doubts and reservations, the major-

ity of Israeli political elites recognize the value of a peace treaty with Syria and have found Damascus reliable enough to contemplate negotiating an agreement with it. The efforts also show that most Israeli prime ministers have felt that if a satisfactory deal were at hand, it could be sold to a skeptical public.

How Do Peace Talks Fit Within Syria's and Israel's Overall Strategies?

Although both Syria and Israel have an interest in peace, both are hedging their bets and also have an interest in conducting talks for talks' sake. Syria, for example, is seriously explor-

Box 1 ■ Past Attempts to Achieve a Golan Heights Land-for-Peace Deal

- Syria–Israeli peace talks are inaugurated at the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference. Syrian president Hafez Assad had asked for the launching of U.S.-sponsored land-for-peace negotiations between Syria and Israel as a condition for joining the first Gulf war coalition.
- 1993–1995: Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and Assad explore conditions. Assad emphasizes full withdrawal for full peace; Rabin accepts the principle of full withdrawal but within the context of full normalization, security guarantees with U.S. participation, full access to water resources, and a careful phasing of implementation over five years. The Syria–Israel track is overtaken by the Israel–Palestine Oslo Accords of September 1993 and the Interim Agreement of July 1995. Rabin is assassinated in November 1995.
- 1995–1996: Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres launches direct peace negotiations with Syria, hosted by U.S. president Bill Clinton in Wye River, Maryland, in December 1995 and February 1996. Significant progress is made on key issues related to land, security, water, normalization, and the phasing of the process. The process collapses in the wake of suicide bomb attacks by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Israel in March 1996.
- 1996–1999: Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu does not resume direct negotiations, but explores possible areas of agreement with Syria through a personal emissary.
- 1999–2001: Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak reengages in direct peace talks with Syria, hosted by President Clinton in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in January 2000. The parties move very close to a deal. Their differences over exact withdrawal lines around Lake Tiberias remain. Facing political challenges at home, Barak feels unable to make further concessions. The talks collapse.
- 2001–2006: Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon opposes land-for-peace negotiations. After September 11, 2001, he finds a like-minded partner in President George W. Bush. Bashar Assad calls for the resumption of peace talks in 2002. Sharon allows his deputy, Ehud Olmert, to indirectly explore points of agreement with Syria using informal private envoys.
- 2006–2008: Israeli prime minister Olmert, with U.S. encouragement, tries to defeat Hizbollah in the summer of 2006, but fails. He subsequently accepts Turkish mediation of indirect peace talks with Syria. The talks are made public in May 2008.
- October 2008: The new Kadima Party leader, Tzipi Livni, fails to form a new Israeli government. Knesset elections are called for February 10, 2009. Livni and Netanyahu vie to form the next postelection government. Livni favors talks with Syria; Netanyahu is critical of them.

ing peace, but also maintains other strategic options. If no peace is reached, the proxy war between Syria and Israel will continue, mainly through Lebanon, but also through Palestine and, indirectly, in Iraq, given the U.S. presence, by maintaining a trickle of support for the insurgents and Jihadis there.

If no peace is reached, Syria has both hard-line and soft-line options. Its hard-line option is to work with Iran, Russia, Hizbollah, Hamas, and other parties to roll back the U.S.-backed gains in Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine and create a new status quo. This would be similar to the rollback achieved by Syria, with Soviet backing, in 1984, when U.S. Marines were driven out of Lebanon.

Syria's soft-line option is to stabilize the current status quo—to accept an unresolved balance of power in Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine; to market itself as a “reliable opponent” that can help manage Hizbollah and Sunni radicalism; and to bargain with its Arab neighbors to alleviate its political and economic isolation.

For Israel, efforts to settle on a strategy have been confounded by its ongoing leadership scramble. Nevertheless, Israel has also been hedging its bets vis-à-vis Syria and thus maintains various options—all of which include talks with Syria. One option, of course, is to explore the possibility of a full peace treaty with Syria. A second option is to engage Syria in talks simply to moderate and neutralize it while preparing for a possible strike on Iran or a future showdown with Hizbollah; in either conflict, Israel would seek to avoid coming to blows with Syria. A third option is to talk with Syria about how to calm the situation on Israel's northern border, mainly by encouraging Syria to resume a larger role in Lebanon managing the threat from Hizbollah.

What Would a Treaty Entail?

The outlines of a treaty between Syria and Israel are already well known to the two parties, having been largely fleshed out in the various rounds of negotiations from 1995 to 2000. It has been agreed that the treaty would contain

provisions concerning borders, security, water, and diplomatic normalization, and that it would be implemented in phases over a number of years, though there are several key unresolved details. Less clear are the issues of Syria's general foreign policy reorientation—if any—in the context of the treaty, and of Syria's future relations with Hizbollah, Hamas, and Iran.

It will take a particularly gifted, fully empowered U.S. secretary of state or presidential envoy—and, eventually, direct presidential engagement—to achieve a breakthrough on the Syrian-Israeli track.

The issue of borders was a sticking point in previous Syrian-Israeli negotiations. For Syria, the return of *all* the Golan Heights is the heart of the treaty. The Bashar Assad regime feels that it cannot afford a compromise on this principle without leaving itself open to serious criticism. Although the border differences under dispute are actually quite small in distance, they have proven challenging. This is partly because of a disparity between the official border of 1923, the actual lines of control on June 4, 1967, and the receding shore of Lake Tiberias. It also reflects the fact that Israel wants to maintain full control of the water resources of the Jordan River and Lake Tiberias. These differences are challenging but not unbridgeable, particularly if more creative approaches to Israel's water needs can be brought into the equation.

On security, both parties acknowledge that given advances in military technology, the Golan Heights are no longer as strategically important as they once were. In any case, the Golan would be a fully demilitarized zone under any treaty. The two sides also understand that the treaty would strictly define zones on either side of the Golan in which the deployment of troops and equipment would be restricted. In the past, Israel has also insisted on an American military surveillance presence on or very near the Golan to ensure compliance with treaty provisions.

Designing the process to implement the treaty would be especially challenging. Israel prefers a phased military withdrawal but wants an exchange of ambassadors and normalization of relations with Syria early in the process. Syria wants full withdrawal first, then normalization. None of these differences is insurmountable, but they will require creative solutions from both parties and from any mediator.

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The implementation process would also need to include understandings relating to changes in Syrian policy toward Lebanon, Iraq, Hizbollah, Hamas, and Iran. Some of these could be written into the treaty; others might have to remain unwritten but would need to be verifiable at particular phases of the process. Syria would need to: effectively control its border with Lebanon and Iraq; stop all arms or personnel transfers to nongovernment actors in those countries; remove itself from Palestinian politics by arranging for Hamas and other Palestinian groups to relocate elsewhere, and fundamentally change its relations with Iran, at least from ally to friend. In achieving this last change, Syria could follow the example of Turkey, which has very good political, trade, and investment relations with Iran but is not locked into a political or military alliance with it.

The U.S. Role

The case for U.S. engagement in mediating Syrian–Israeli peace talks is simple: There is a real chance to achieve Syrian–Israeli peace, and it would be of great value to U.S. interests in the region. Although the two parties have conducted indirect bilateral talks without U.S. mediation, they cannot and will not achieve a peace treaty without robust U.S. engagement and leadership. U.S. interests in the Middle East include a more stable Iraq, a weaker Iran,

progress in the Arab–Israeli peace process, a stable Lebanon, a weaker Hizbollah, a weaker Jihadi movement, and an improved American image. Peace between Syria and Israel would have a positive impact on them all.

Although Syria is a junior actor in Iraq compared with Iran, it still has played a spoiler role, and fuller Syrian control of its border and cooperation with the new Iraqi government would be a positive development for Iraq. A Syria at peace with Israel would be less useful to Iran; the anti-American, anti-Israeli, anti-peace alliance that Iran has built would be broken at its midpoint. Iranian influence would remain strong in Iraq, but its influence in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine would be reduced. Progress on the Syrian–Israeli track is where progress in the Arab–Israeli peace process is most possible. Because the Israeli–Palestinian track is far more complicated—given Israeli settlement issues on the West Bank and internal Palestinian divisions—it will be very difficult to achieve serious progress there in the immediate future. And Syria has enough leverage to obstruct Israeli–Palestinian progress if the issue of the Golan Heights is not addressed first.

With regard to Lebanon, that country has been the victim of a Syrian–Israeli proxy war ever since the Golan Heights were occupied in 1967. It will not see real sovereignty or stability unless Syria and Israel achieve a peace accord. Syria has backed proxy armies in Lebanon to pressure Israel into giving back the Golan. Without peace, Syria will continue to back proxy forces and compromise Lebanese sovereignty; with peace, Syria will be required to respect the sovereignty of its border with Lebanon and end its support of nonstate actors there. If Syria ceases providing a strategic bridge between Iran and Hizbollah, Hizbollah will not be able to sustain its military posture.

With regard to Sunni radical militants, a peace accord between Syria and Israel might either deflate or aggravate al-Qaeda-style Jihadis who oppose peace. In the recent past, Syria has dabbled in supporting Sunni radicals—in Iraq, Palestine, and possibly Lebanon—as part

of its strategy of proxy wars. But in the context of peace, Syria would be expected to return to its core aversion to Sunni Jihadi militants and play a more effective role in curbing their influence.

Finally, if the United States plays an active role in securing peace between Syria and Israel, it would help restore America's image as a force for peace and stability in the region—significantly improving the U.S. image in the Arab and Islamic world.

A robust U.S. engagement with Israel and Syria would have only limited potential downsides. If a Syrian-Israeli peace treaty is not achieved but talks nevertheless continue under U.S. mediation, Washington would have more leverage over Damascus to encourage it to moderate its policies. And even if the talks were to collapse acrimoniously, the United States would still not be any worse off than it is today. An argument against the United States engaging is that Syria is not serious about peace, and any engagement would mean appeasement and would reward Syria for bad behavior. Yet Syria has demonstrated considerable seriousness about a land-for-peace deal over the Golan Heights since 1991—it has often been the Israeli side that has been more reluctant—and, by most political and diplomatic measures, Syria is quite serious now as well. Also, within any approach, the United States should maintain sanctions on Syria until it changes its policies vis-à-vis Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine, and such changes would need to be part of the phased approach to Syrian-Israeli peace. Engagement on such terms would mean proactive pressure, not appeasement.

The Obama administration should develop an integrated policy to push the Syrian-Israeli track forward. This policy should include a stick, carrots, and active diplomacy. The stick would be a continuation of the Bush administration's policy of pushing and keeping Syria out of Lebanon, and maintaining pressure on Syria as long as it violates Lebanese and Iraqi sovereignty. This would mean continued support for UN Security Council resolutions on

Lebanon and the International Hariri Tribunal, as well as continued U.S. sanctions as long as Syria violates its neighbors' sovereignty. This pressure has helped push Syria more urgently toward a peace deal. Indeed, some in Syria, even within the regime, might favor maintaining this pressure, because if it is lifted prematurely, hard-line regime factions would feel vindicated and see less of an urgent need for a peace deal.

Despite some doubts and reservations, the majority of Israeli political elites recognize the value of a peace treaty with Syria and have found Damascus reliable enough to contemplate negotiating an agreement with it ... [and] if a satisfactory deal were at hand, it could be sold to a skeptical public.

The Bush policy was all stick and no carrot, all threat and no diplomacy. But the new administration should pursue a more balanced approach. The prize for Syria, of course, would be the return of the Golan Heights; the carrots would include ending Syria's political isolation, and U.S. help in securing World Trade Organization accession and encouraging foreign direct investment. But the carrots must *not* include any compromise on Lebanese or Iraqi sovereignty, nor any deal on the Hariri Tribunal.

This stick-and-carrot approach will not work on its own, of course. Intelligent, strong diplomacy will also be needed to move the process forward. The issues between Israel and Syria are complex, and the challenge of shifting Syria's strategic posture is even more demanding. Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has done an excellent job so far. But it will take a particularly gifted, fully empowered U.S. secretary of state or presidential envoy—and, eventually, direct presidential engagement—to achieve a breakthrough on the Syrian-Israeli track.

Peace between Syria and Israel is a real possibility that would have significant positive outcomes. The incoming Obama administration should try to turn this possibility into a reality. ■

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