

Bringing Damascus into the Tent: Can Washington Revive Israel-Syria Peace Talks?

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Sep 28, 2010

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Brief Analysis

On September 27, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton conferred with her Syrian counterpart Walid Mouallem on the sidelines of a UN meeting in New York. And two weeks earlier, U.S. peace envoy George Mitchell met with President Bashar al-Asad in Damascus. This latest flurry of diplomatic activity seems aimed at convincing Syria to abstain from playing a spoiler's role in renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. To strengthen its hand, Washington is floating the prospect of a U.S.-led "comprehensive peace" that would include Syria and Lebanon, contingent on Asad constraining Syrian-based Palestinian rejectionist groups.

Indeed, Israel may be amenable to resuming a U.S.-sponsored peace track with Syria in the near future if Damascus can keep Hamas and others from interfering with the new Palestinian talks. Playing such a positive role would win Syria few accolades among its allies in Iran and Lebanon. Yet the looming prospect of an International Atomic Energy Agency investigation and fallout from the ongoing Hariri assassination tribunal may spur Asad to welcome the notion of becoming a "peace partner."

Territory vs. Ties with Iran and Hizballah

Syria and Israel last held indirect peace talks in 2007-2008, under Turkish auspices. At the time, Damascus reportedly asked Israel to clarify six points about the June 4, 1967 line, while Israel requested details on Syria's relationship with Hizballah and Iran. Syria left the talks after Israel launched Gaza military operations against Hamas in December 2008.

Today, Damascus says it would be willing to return to indirect talks under Turkish auspices if Israel committed to withdraw to June 1967 line as a basis for eventual direct talks. Israel, pointing to its deteriorating relations with Turkey, has indicated that it prefers U.S.-mediated direct talks focusing not only on territory, but also on the Iran-Hizballah angle. This disagreement has blocked the resumption of negotiations thus far.

Mitchell visited Damascus in June and July 2009 to discuss the prospects for comprehensive regional peace, including an Israel-Syria treaty. Soon thereafter, Washington and Damascus launched an initiative on "technical evaluation of Iraqi border posts" in an effort to stem the flow of insurgents from Syria to Iraq. But the initiative was scuttled by the August 19, 2009, bombings in Baghdad, which the Iraqi government blamed on Damascus. The resulting war of words led both countries to withdraw their ambassadors, who did not return to their posts until earlier this month.

In fall 2009, with the prospects for progress on the Syria track dimming, the Obama administration began to push for an Israeli withdrawal from the disputed village of Ghajar, between Lebanon and the Golan Heights. But those hopes ended after Israel's November 2009 seizure of the ship *Francop*, which was smuggling thirty-six containers of Iranian rockets bound for the Syrian port of Latakia and, likely, Hizballah.

In spring 2010, the Netanyahu government became even less amenable to renewed talks with Damascus following reports that Syria had transferred long-range rockets and missiles (including Scuds) to Hizballah. Those reports spurred further U.S. visits to Damascus by Mitchell, Undersecretary of State William Burns, and Sen. John Kerry. It is unclear whether the visits resolved the problem, however. Since then, reports have surfaced that Iran has transferred radar systems to Syria that could facilitate Hizballah operations against Israeli aircraft. In addition, Russia will reportedly sell Damascus the P-800 antiship missile, an advanced system that military analysts believe can also be used against land targets.

Mutual Advantages in Talks

Despite -- or perhaps because of -- the heightened tensions, Israel and Syria have many reasons to resume talks, whether indirect or direct, public or secret. Tactically, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu may view such talks as a complementary track to the Palestinian process, circumventing traditional spoilers such as Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Alternatively, he could follow Israel's model from the 1990s, using Syria as a competing track in order to pressure the Palestinians into continuing good-faith negotiations.

For its part, Syria is facing a showdown with the International Atomic Energy Agency over stonewalling a probe into its nuclear activities. Historically speaking, Damascus is well aware that the best way to deflect or defer U.S. and international pressure is to open peace talks with Israel.

Both countries have strategic reasons to return to the table as well. Amid the slow erosion of the March 14 coalition's influence in Lebanon, members of Israel's defense establishment increasingly see a peace treaty with Syria as a way to contain Hizballah's expanding influence in Lebanon. Although the details

of this strategy are unknown, the conventional Israeli wisdom is that a treaty would force Syria to end its arms transfers to the group. As for Damascus, the regime is keen to enhance and legitimize its influence in Lebanon, and a peace treaty could facilitate that goal, especially if it stipulated a Syrian role vis-a-vis Hizballah.

Meanwhile, the mediator's role remains in flux. With the decline in Israel-Turkey relations, Washington -- led by Mitchell's coordinator for regional affairs, Frederic Hof -- has stepped into the breach. France is eyeing a potential leadership role as well, recently appointing former ambassador to Syria Jean-Claude Cousseran as its Middle East peace envoy.

Decision Time for Asad?

On September 16, on the heels of Mitchell's latest trip to Damascus, a senior U.S. official told the Christian Science Monitor, "If Hamas succeeds [in scuttling the Palestinian talks], the prospects for eventual Syria-Israel talks are zero." Accordingly, Washington is currently focusing on how Damascus balances its ties with Hamas and Hizballah in order to gauge Asad's intentions.

While Hamas marked the renewed peace process with attacks on Israeli civilians and rocket fire, the official Syrian reaction to the talks has thus far been muted. This weekend, however, Damascus hosted Fatah-Hamas reconciliation talks, after which Hamas leader Khaled Mashal urged President Mahmoud Abbas to walk away from the table following Sunday's expiration of Israel's settlement moratorium. This approach suggests that Damascus has returned to its old strategy of straddling the diplomatic fence on questions of war and peace.

If Abbas continues the negotiations, however, then Damascus may yet be tempted to make different choices. One key test in the coming months will be whether Syria continues to provide sophisticated weaponry and training to Hizballah. Another test concerns the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL). Tensions in Lebanon have spiked over an apparent Hizballah effort to topple the government of Prime Minister Saad Hariri if he does not end Lebanese participation in the STL, which is widely expected to indict Hizballah members for Rafiq Hariri's assassination. Will Damascus allow the tribunal to proceed or side with Hizballah?

Asad's choices on Hamas and Hizballah will take place against the backdrop of the Iranian nuclear issue. The United States hopes that progress between Israel and Syria would further isolate Iran. Asad's calculus has yet to be revealed.

Conclusion

In an interview appearing in today's Wall Street Journal, Foreign Minister Mouallem downplayed the prospects of renewed talks with Israel and voiced opposition to many of Washington's regional initiatives. Previously, Syria had showed signs of changing tack after a year of making little headway with the Obama administration. For example, during Mitchell's talks in Damascus, the regime excluded Ambassador Imad Mustafa, who had been blamed for past diplomatic miscues and is prone to unhelpful triumphalist comments. Yet Mouallem's comments seem a setback to progress.

Concerned with Syria's behavior and perplexed by its tone, Congress continues to hold up confirmation of U.S. ambassador-designate Robert Ford. These and other developments indicate that movement on the Syria track will continue to be slow and arduous, regardless of new spikes in official visits and other diplomatic activity.

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