

# Iran and the Prospects for Syria-Israel Peace

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## Brief Analysis

Iran--Syria's closest ally since the fall of the Soviet Union--has perhaps the most to fear from the prospect of Syria-Israel peace. Indeed, Tehran seems to have been caught off guard by Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad's decision to reenter negotiations, and Tehran is accordingly viewing with great concern Syria's apparent readiness to end its state of war with Israel. Asad's son and designated heir, Bashar, is reported by the Israeli paper Yediot Ahronot to be heading soon to Tehran to soothe Iran. If he goes, he will have a tough time. Recent meetings between Iran's and Hizballah's leaderships and strong signals in Iran's press against the Syria-Israel peace process suggest that Tehran is preparing to step up its anti-peace process action.

**Iran's Good Friend** When many Arab states shut their embassies in and air links to Tehran at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, Syria's relations with Iran blossomed. At first, Syria benefited materially: In the early 1980s, Iran provided Syria low cost oil, but that ended long ago. Now, the two countries' economic relationship is marginal; Syria's delegate to October's Tehran International Trade Fair called Syria-Iran trade "nearly unheard of." Over the past decade, this relationship has been more political than material, built upon intelligence cooperation; mutual antipathy toward Iraq, Israel, Turkey, and the more moderate Arab states; and support for terrorist groups like Hizballah. Cooperation in intelligence and security is especially strong. According to the pacifist-clerical Committee for Shi'i Defense, in 1997, Syrian intelligence agents handed over to Iran a defector from Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i's inner-circle; the defector was promptly executed. Syria also reportedly assisted in the Iranians' taking custody of Israeli airman Ron Arad, shot down over southern Lebanon in 1986 and captured alive by the Shi'i Amal militia, and perhaps other Israeli soldiers who remain missing. The most active aspect of Iran-Syria relations has been support for Hizballah and other terrorist groups.

**A Rosy Future for Hizballah?** Hizballah's primary backer is Iran, from which it receives money and weapons. Until recently, much of this support was channeled through Damascus, which is host to numerous terrorist organizations' headquarters and has twice-weekly Iran Air service to Tehran. The key issues in gauging the effect of peace talks on the Syrian-Iranian relationship will be the level of Hizballah terrorism during the peace talks, the constraints placed by Syria on Iranian access to Hizballah, and the extent of Iranian efforts to circumvent Syria in resupplying Hizballah.

In October, Hasan Nasrallah, head of Hizballah, traveled to Tehran and met not only with Khamene'i and Majlis (parliament) Speaker 'Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, both hardliners, but also with President Muhammad Khatami who, according to the Tehran Times, declared, "Freedom of Quds [Jerusalem] is our common goal and we should not let aliens hatch plots to sow discord among us." High-level Arab and Israeli government sources both reported that, during Nasrallah's visit, Iranian officials discussed how to maintain support for Hizballah's activities, both by bypassing Syria and through cooperation with radical Palestinian groups. There is real cause for worry. On June 23, Iran Air announced the resumption of direct flights to Beirut after nearly three decades. U.S. intelligence reports, cited in the Washington Post, note that Iran has supplied Hizballah with longer-range Katyusha rockets capable of hitting Haifa. American intelligence analysts also report Iranian material support to Hamas increased in 1999 after several years of decline.

Iran's Opposition to the Peace Process Not even the supposedly reform-minded Khatami has been willing to mention possible relations with Israel. In his famous "Dialogue of Civilizations" speech, Khatami singled out the "Zionist regime" as the only state Iran would not recognize. Some of Iran's harshest vitriol toward Israel comes on "Jerusalem Day," the last Friday in Ramadan (this year, December 31), when Iran sponsors demonstrations in Iran and abroad calling for the city's liberation. In 1998, former Iranian president 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, often touted as a moderate, declared in his Jerusalem Day speech, "The crimes that the Zionists committed were far greater compared to those of Hitler." Jerusalem Day will no doubt take on special significance this year for Iranian hardliners and domestic pressure groups.

Iran's Possible Actions Given both the Islamic Republic's rhetoric and the power-grip of radicals, there can be no optimism that Iran's relations with Israel will thaw in the event of Syria-Israel peace. Even after any future Israeli-Palestinian deal, an Iranian détente with Israel will move at a glacial pace, if at all. Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic has options within its self-imposed policy constraints.

Do Nothing. In the wake of the announcement of the resumption of Israel-Syria talks, Iran's media was initially restrained, reported the minimum, and offered little commentary. Although Iran might oppose Middle East peace in principle, it could choose not to pose obstacles to its path. In part because of their common religion with many Palestinians, Iranians are generally sympathetic to the Palestinians. According to conversations on the streets of Tehran and provincial capitals, however, the Palestinian question is not at the forefront of their concern. Indeed, Iranians have in common with Israelis the fact that almost every person has a family member or close friend who died in a war with an Arab state. On November 18, the moderate Iran News called for a wait-and-see attitude, voicing the dilemma that while some think "that peace with the Zionists is unthinkable and Palestinian combatants must be supported all the way," others feel that if the Islamic world and the majority of Palestinians make peace, than Iran should follow. Although some candidates for the February 18 parliamentary elections may hold such a view, they are unlikely to express this opinion openly--an act that would only embolden hardliners and the Council of Guardians, which vets and disqualifies candidates it considers too moderate.

Derail the Process. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has used its vitriol toward "the Zionist Entity" to deflect attention from its own internal woes and to stake a claim to leadership of the Islamic world. Indeed, Iran currently holds the three-year chair of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. On December 18, the pro-Khamene'i, pro-intelligence services Jumhuri-yi Islami castigated Damascus, declaring that "Syria . . . has recognized the sinister and illegitimate existence of the occupiers of Palestine." Ominously, during his Friday sermon on December 17, Khamene'i himself threatened, "We will catch by the scruff of the neck those defending the betrayal of the Palestinian people." Even if Iran chooses not to act against Syria, there are signs it may indeed choose to heighten its violent opposition to the peace process. In Lebanon, Iranian officials are said to be training operatives from Hizballah, Hamas, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command. Israel reports some Hamas members have been among those killed in recent clashes in southern Lebanon. This coordination could lead to new fronts in anti-peace-process terrorism.

The U.S. Dimension U.S. requests to Syria that it restrain Hizballah during the peace negotiations are important, but they constitute only one element of what Syria should do to earn its spot at the U.S.-hosted peace table. Indeed, even an eventual rapprochement with the United States will require more from Syria than merely a cessation of support to terrorist organizations. Severing the intelligence and security connection with Iran and between Iran and Hizballah is critical. Syria cannot simply reroute Iranian funds and the resupply of Hizballah and other groups through Beirut instead of Damascus. Canceling Iran Air's flights to Beirut is vital.

At the same time, Washington needs to approach its European partners to underscore concern about Iran and to have them send messages to Tehran that material opposition to the peace process by any faction inside Iran is

unacceptable and would damage any budding renewal of European-Iranian ties. The "dialogue of civilizations" touted by both Khatami and Syrian foreign minister Faruq al-Shara cannot be undertaken at the end of a katyusha missile.

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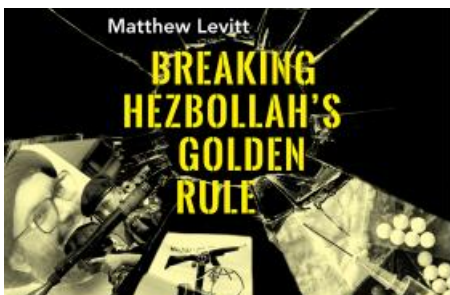
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