

# The Syria-Israel Peace Gambit

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Few would argue that the indirect Israel-Syria talks through Turkish mediation, which were first announced 21 May, were a sign of political maturity and readiness for peace. In fact, while the discussions seemed concerned with the occupied Syrian Golan Heights and Israel's desire for security at its northern borders, the true objective behind the sudden engagement of Syria is largely concerned with Iran, Hizbullah and Hamas.

A precarious report published in The Jerusalem Post — citing a news report in the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Rai on 2 September — claimed that the Damascus-based Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal has left Syria and moved to Sudan. "Palestinian sources told the paper that Meshaal had come to an understanding with Damascus whereby the Hamas chief would agree to leave the state," according to the report. It suggested that the indirect negotiations between Syria and Israel "may have played a part in the decision". Hamas soon denied the report.

Whether the report is fully, partially or not at all accurate, the fact remains that Israel's key objective in engaging Syria is to further isolate Hamas and to deny its leadership safe haven. Syria opened its doors to several Palestinian factions, who have operated politically with a degree of unison, following the September 1993 Oslo Accords. The relationship between Syria and Hamas in particular was often scrutinised as a Syrian bargaining chip in any future negotiations with Israel over the fate of the Golan. It is no secret that Israel would not transfer the Golan back to its rightful owner if Hamas and other Palestinian groups continue to use Damascus as their headquarters, a platform of political freedom and a degree of legitimacy.

But this is an issue that even Hamas itself doesn't seem to be concerned with, at least at the moment, for it's equally understood that Israel is not serious about its negotiations with Syria, and that the whole affair is a political manoeuvre aimed at disturbing the Syria-Iran alliance, cutting off the supposed Hizbullah weapon supply route, and further de-legitimising Hamas, while propping up its Palestinian rivals. Israel is "engaging" Syria because it's simply running out of options.

Consider A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm, a report prepared and signed by major Washington-based neoconservatives in 1996. It made the following recommendation to the Israeli government at the time: "Negotiations with repressive regimes like Syria's require cautious realism. One cannot sensibly assume the other side's good faith. It is dangerous for Israel to deal naïvely with a regime murderous of its own people, openly aggressive towards its neighbours, criminally involved with international drug traffickers and counterfeiters, and supportive of the most deadly terrorist organisations."

The mindset behind the report had great sway over Israeli thinking, as was made clear in 2000 when then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak froze Israeli-Syrian negotiations at a point that an agreement was reportedly at hand. The thrust of Israel's policy towards Syria was predicated on the latter's presence in Lebanon. Even after Hizbullah forced Israel out of Lebanon in the summer of 2000, Israel never disavowed its interests in that small country, and thoroughly focussed on removing Syria, a task that was made possible with backing from Washington.

"Syria challenges Israel on Lebanese soil. An effective approach, and one with which Americans can sympathise, would be if Israel seized the strategic initiative along its northern borders by engaging Hizbullah, Syria and Iran, as the principal agents of aggression in Lebanon," the Clean Break report recommended.

That was tried and failed miserably. Israel's goals were trashed in its war on Lebanon in July-August 2006. The war delivered more than a military blow to Israel and a political blow to its benefactors in Washington. It empowered Hizbullah to emerge as Lebanon's strongest party without any direct Syrian involvement.

Since then, Israel has resorted to a strategy of scare tactics against Syria and its Iranian ally. French President Nicolas Sarkozy used a recent four-way summit in Damascus to deliver an essentially Israeli message. He warned Iran of a "catastrophic" Israeli strike if it insists on pursuing its nuclear programme. Although the message was to Iran, the hope was for Syria to take notice as well.

But Sarkozy's choice of Damascus to promote Israel's ominous threat further highlights the relevance of Iran to his efforts, which would not have actualised without prior Israeli consent. Considering how quickly the Iraqi regime fell following the US invasion in 2003, and the succumbing of the Libyan government soon after, Syria is treading carefully, while trying to hold on to several winning cards, its strong relationship with Iran being one.

Although Syria is eager to reclaim the Israeli occupied Syrian Golan Heights, its leaders must also realise that the current Israeli leadership is in no position to negotiate withdrawal from what was illegally annexed by the Israeli Knesset in 1982. To override the strong opposition to withdrawal, the Israeli leadership must be indisputably interested in ending the occupation — which it is not — and strong enough to pull off such a major "concession", which is also not the case.

Nonetheless, Syria carries on with its indirect talks with Israel, one round after the other, with much enthusiasm, coupled with talks about economic development, investment, etc.

It is clear that neither Israel nor Syria is anticipating a "breakthrough" anytime soon. For now, talking is an end in itself. Concurrently, Israel wishes to woo Syria to break with Hamas and other Palestinian groups, break with Iran and, at least, twist Hizbullah's arm in Lebanon. Syria, on the other hand, knows well that indirect talks with Israel are an unmatched act of political validation in the West, enough to lessen US threats, win France's friendship, and appear in a positive light internationally.

Both parties want to come across as accommodating, willing partners in peace and, at a future point, there might be a few overtures, the extent of which could be devastating to Palestinian factions in Damascus. Meshaal might not be in Sudan, but if he is, or will be soon, one cannot be entirely surprised.

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