
The Imperatives of Syrian-Israeli Peace

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The opportunity for peace between Syria and Israel is real. The two countries have come close to an agreement twice before, through U.S.-mediated talks in 1995–1996 and again in 1999–2000. Recently Israel and Syria have been conducting indirect peace negotiations under Turkish auspices. However, they have both expressed a need for U.S. mediation to carry the talks to the next level. Although there is no guarantee of success, the benefits of a Syria-Israel peace deal would be remarkable, not only for the two countries themselves, but also for the Lebanese, Iraqis, as well as countries that are interested in containing Iran's influence in the region. A deal between Syria and Israel would also help revive the Arab peace initiative, which was launched in 2002 and proposed a broad normalization of relations between Israel and member states of the Arab League. These outcomes would be very much in the interest of the United States. The Obama administration should recognize that Syrian-Israeli peace could provide an important breakthrough in the Middle East and should therefore develop an integrated approach to help make peace between Israel and Syria possible.

SYRIAN AND ISRAELI INTERESTS AT STAKE

For Syria, regaining the Golan has been a key ambition for decades. The Golan was lost under Hafez Assad's watch in 1967 when he was defense

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minister, and its loss has remained a stain on the regime and the ruling family ever since. Hafez Assad tried direct war, proxy war, and negotiations to return the territory. In 1973, he joined Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in direct war against Israel to force Israel's hand. While Sadat, through daring diplomacy in subsequent years, ended up regaining the Sinai, Syria ended up losing the Golan to Israeli annexation in 1981. Stymied in direct war, Syria pursued indirect war against Israel, initially by supporting the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon, and after 1982 by supporting Hizbollah. Syria hoped that these direct and indirect wars would 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. However, his regime has managed Syria's fortunes poorly within this overall strategy. Syria was pushed out of Lebanon in 2005, became

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isolated both regionally and internationally, and came under UN investigation for its possible involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. In effect, Bashar has botched the intricate alliance system that Hafez had painstakingly constructed, in which alliance with Iran was complemented by good relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as well as with Europe and the United States. Bashar's policies have strained many of those relations and left Syria dangerously overdependent on Iran. Needless to say, Iran cannot help Syria get the Golan back nor can it guarantee the regime's long-term security. Moreover, Syria cannot sustain the intensely confrontational anti-American foreign policy that oil-fueled states such as Iran or Venezuela can afford.

Events in Syria's neighborhood have also made the country 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 the toppling of the Baath regime in Baghdad in 2003, rattled the Syrian power structure. Although Washington stepped back from regime-change rhetoric, the Israeli attack on an alleged nuclear site in September 2007 and the American raid on insurgents operating in northeastern Syria in October 2008 underscored Syria's continued strategic vulnerability.

Instability in Iraq has also been a cause for serious Syrian concern, although Damascus exacerbated it by allowing radicals to transit through its territories to join the Iraqi 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 Sunnis 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 Sunnis and Shi’a in Iraq and around the region, amid growing signs of—so far nonpolitical—Islamism in Syria, also undermines the secular Baath regime in Syria. The 2006 war between Israel and Hizbollah also hurt Syria’s position. Although Hizbollah claimed victory, the war negatively impacted its ability to resume anti-Israeli operations. Hizbollah was pushed out of its main zone of operation along the Israeli border, and tensions between the organization and Israel have reached such critical levels that any further operation would almost certainly trigger another massive response from Israel. Thus for Syria, Hizbollah’s function as a harassing force against Israel—a role it had played for the past two decades—ended in the summer of 2006.

For all these reasons, Bashar Assad appears to be in desperate need of a breakthrough with Israel more than his father ever was. The return of the Golan to Syria would be—and
 would be promoted as—a historic political and strategic achievement. *Bashar Assad appears to
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 Bashar will 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 peace with Israel, it will join that club of Arab authoritarian regimes that are also regarded protectively by the United States.

The UN tribunal concerning the Hariri assassination is also relevant. Although little is publicly known about what the UN investigation has uncovered, concern about the tribunal in Syria, and the possibility that it might indict senior Syrian officials, remains significant. Whatever the investigation concludes about Syrian involvement in the Hariri assassination, Bashar knows that he would be better off if his government were in serious peace talks with Israel—or had signed an actual peace treaty—when the tribunal finally begins its hearings.

Syria could also expect economic dividends from a peace treaty. The treaty, especially under U.S. stewardship, would largely end Syria’s isolation from the Arab world and the international community, and this would

open the doors for greater Arab and international investment. Syria's isolation has thwarted its attempts to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, join the WTO, and attract large-scale foreign investment in general. Although Turkey, Iran, Malaysia, China, and others can help mitigate Syria's economic woes, it would take a change in U.S. policy to fully open the gates of Arab and global investment. With a large and impoverished population, but a significant manufacturing and trading base, Syria badly needs such investment.

For Israel, the benefits of a peace treaty with Syria are also numerous. After peace with Egypt and Jordan, and the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, peace with Syria would neutralize Israel's last significant Arab opponent. It would put pressure on Lebanon to negotiate and sign a peace treaty with Israel as well, and it would greatly narrow the strategic options for Hizbollah as well as for Hamas. A treaty would also pave the way for relaunching the Arab peace initiative. Finally, it would weaken Iran's influence in this part of the Middle East—Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Peace with Syria would be even more valuable to Israel today than it was in 1996 or 2000, when an agreement was almost reached, because Iran, Hizbollah, and Hamas have all emerged as more intractable threats—threats that could be reduced if a breakthrough is achieved with Syria.

Most Israelis do not deny the value of peace with Syria, but they rather doubt the sincerity or reliability of Syria in reaching or implementing an agreement. They see that Syria supports Hizbollah, Hamas, and Iraqi insurgents and is allied with Iran—all forces that oppose peace with Israel—and conclude that Syria cannot be serious about peace. They see how Syria has treated Lebanon and surmise that Syria cannot be a good neighbor. Many Israelis also fear a land-for-peace deal that will leave them without the Golan but also with no assurances that Syria will change its stripes. Thus, Israel has argued that Syria must give up its hard-line alliances before peace can be considered; Syria, meanwhile, has argued that had it not developed these

..... alliances, Israel would happily maintain its annexation of the Golan and would never come to the negotiating table.

Israeli political elites recognize the value of a peace treaty with Syria.

..... Notwithstanding these prevalent Israeli sentiments, five out of six Israeli prime ministers since Yitzhak Rabin have actively explored peace with Syria.

This reflects the fact that, despite some doubts and reservations, Israeli political elites recognize the value of a peace treaty with Syria and find Damascus reliable enough to contemplate an agreement with its regime. It

also shows that most Israeli prime ministers have felt that if a satisfactory deal was at hand, it could be sold to a skeptical public.

HEDGING THEIR BETS?

Although Syria and Israel do have an interest in peace, both states are hedging their bets and are also interested in conducting talks for talks' sake. Syria's pursuit of peace negotiations is serious; however, negotiations with Israel have failed in the past and hence Syria maintains other options as well. If no peace is reached, the proxy war between Syria and Israel will continue, mainly through Lebanon, but also through Palestine and indirectly, with the United States in Iraq by maintaining a trickle of support for insurgents and militants there. If no peace is reached, Syria has two options. The first is to work with Iran, Russia, Hizbollah, Hamas, and others to roll back U.S.-supported gains in Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine and create a new status quo. This would be similar to the rollback achieved by Syria (with Soviet support) in 1984 when U.S. marines were driven out of Lebanon.

Syria's other option is to stabilize the current status quo: accept an unresolved balance of power in Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine; market itself as a "reliable opponent" who can help manage Hizbollah and Sunni radicalism; and bargain with Arab neighbors for an alleviation of Syria's political and economic isolation.

In Israel, settling on a strategy has been confounded by the ongoing leadership scramble. Nevertheless, Israel too has been hedging its bets vis-à-vis Syria and maintains various options, all of which include talks with Syria. One option it has pursued, as mentioned above, has been to explore the possibility of a full peace treaty with Syria. A second option is to engage Syria in talks simply in order to moderate and neutralize it while preparing for a possible strike on Iran or a future showdown with Hizbollah; in either conflict, Israel would be keen not to come to blows with Syria. A third option is to talk with Syria about ways to stabilize and calm the status quo on Israel's northern border, mainly by encouraging Syria to resume a larger role in Lebanon in order to manage the threat from Hizbollah. In all three options, talks with Syria are instrumental for Israel.

NEGOTIATING A TREATY

The outlines of a treaty between Syria and Israel are already well known to both parties, having been largely fleshed out in the various rounds

of negotiations from 1995 to 2000. There is a common understanding that the treaty would contain provisions concerning borders, security, water, and diplomatic normalization, and would be implemented in phases over a number of years. Less clear is the issue of Syria's general foreign policy reorientation in the context of a treaty and the future of Syria's relations with Hizbollah, Hamas, and Iran.

The issue of borders was a sticking point in previous negotiations. For Syria, the return of all of the Golan is the heart of the treaty. The Assad regime is firm in its belief 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, they have proved to be 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 edge 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. The differences are challenging but not unbridgeable, particularly if more creative approaches to Israel's water needs are brought into the equation.

On security, both parties acknowledge that given advances in military technology, the Golan Heights are not as strategically important today as they were before. It bears emphasis here that the Golan would be a fully demilitarized zone in any potential treaty. In addition, the two sides understand that there would have to be strictly defined zones on either side of the Golan in which 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 these provisions.

Designing the process of implementation will be especially difficult. 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 are insurmountable, but they will require creative solutions from the parties and from any mediator.

The implementation process would also have to include understanding relating to Syrian policy toward Lebanon, Hizbollah, Hamas, and Iran. Some of these concerns could be written into a treaty, while others might have to remain unwritten but would have to be verifiable within particular phases of implementation. Syria has already withdrawn from Lebanon, halted what appeared to be a campaign of assassinations and destabilization, and acknowledged Lebanese sovereignty through the establishment of Syrian-Lebanese diplomatic relations. It has also exercised

more control over its border with Iraq to reduce, although not completely stem, the flow of insurgents. In addition, Syria has also signaled its desire to break out of its overdependence on Iran by establishing strong political and economic relations with Turkey and by rebuilding relations with France and, more broadly, Europe as well as with the Arab gulf countries, especially Qatar.

From Israel's point of view, Syria would have to implement a number of verifiable policy changes as part of the phased implementation of the treaty: effectively control its border with Lebanon and stop all arms transfers to nongovernmental Lebanese actors, remove itself from Palestinian politics by asking Hamas and other Palestinian groups to relocate elsewhere, and change its relations with Iran from ally to friend. Turkey might be a positive example since it has very good political, trade, and investment relations with Iran, but is not locked into a political or military alliance with it. Syria needs to go in the same direction.

THE UNITED STATES: A BROKER FOR PEACE?

The case for U.S. engagement in mediating Syrian-Israeli peace talks is simple: the chance for Syrian-Israeli peace is real; it would thus 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. The U.S.'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 in the Middle East. Syria has an influence on all these interests, and peace between Syria and Israel would positively impact them all.

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Compared to Iran, Syria is a junior player in Iraq, but it has still played a spoiler role. Therefore, more adequate 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 ebb. Progress on

the Syrian-Israeli track is where progress in the Arab-Israeli peace process is most possible; the Israeli-Palestinian track is far more complicated and Israeli settlement issues in the West Bank as well as internal Palestinian divisions render serious progress in the near future very difficult. In addition, Syria has enough leverage to obstruct Israeli-Palestinian progress if the Golan is not addressed first.

Lebanon has been the victim of Syrian-Israeli proxy war ever since the Golan was occupied in 1967, and it will not see real sovereignty or stability unless Syria and Israel are at peace. Syria has backed Hizbollah to pressure Israel into giving back the Golan. Without peace, Syria will continue to back Hizbollah; with peace, Syria will be required to verifiably end its support for Hizbollah. Without Syria providing a strategic bridge between Iran and Hizbollah, Hizbollah will not be able to sustain its current military and political posture.

With regard to Sunni radical militants, peace between Syria and Israel might deflate or aggravate al-Qaeda-style jihadis who oppose peace. Syria has dabbled in supporting Sunni radicals in the recent past—in Iraq, Palestine, and possibly even Lebanon—as part of its strategy of proxy war. However, 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.

PAST ATTEMPTS AT A GOLAN-FOR-PEACE DEAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Syria-Israeli peace talks inaugurated in 1991 Madrid Peace Conference. Assad asks for launching of U.S.-sponsored land-for-peace negotiations between Syria and Israel as condition for joining First Gulf War coalition.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 1993-1995: Rabin and Assad explore conditions. Assad emphasizes full withdrawal for full peace; Rabin accepts principle of full withdrawal but within the context of full normalization, security guarantees with U.S. participation, full access to water resources, and careful phasing of implementation over five years. Syria-Israel track overtaken by Israel-Palestine Oslo Accords of September 1993 and the 'Interim Agreement' of July 1995. Rabin assassinated in November 1995.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 1995-1996: Peres launches into direct peace negotiations with Syria hosted by U.S. President Clinton in Wye River, Maryland, in December 1995 and February 1996. Significant progress made on key issues related to land, security, water, normalization and phasing of process. Process collapses in wake of four suicide attacks by Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Israel in March 1996.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 1996-1999: Netanyahu does not resume direct negotiations, but explores possible areas of agreement with Syria through a personal emissary.

<p>■ 1999-2001: Ehud Barak reengages in direct peace talks with Syria hosted by President Clinton in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in January 2000. Parties move very close to a deal. Differences over exact withdrawal lines around Lake Tiberias remain. Facing political challenges at home, Barak feels unable to make further concessions. Talks collapse.</p>
<p>■ 2001-2006: Sharon opposes land-for-peace negotiations. After September 11, 2001, he finds like-minded partner in President George W. Bush. Bashar Assad calls for resumption of peace talks as of 2002. Sharon allows his deputy, Ehud Olmert, to indirectly explore points of agreement with Syria through informal private envoys.</p>
<p>■ 2006-2008: Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, with U.S. encouragement, tries to defeat Hizbollah in the summer of 2006, but fails. Subsequently accepts Turkish mediation of indirect peace talks with Syria. Talks made public in May 2008.</p>
<p>■ October 2008: New Kadima Party leader Tzipi Livni fails to form new government. Knesset elections are called for February 10, 2009. Livni and Netanyahu vying to form next post-election government. Livni favors talks with Syria; Netanyahu critical of them.</p>

Finally, in terms of the U.S.'s image in the Arab and broader Muslim worlds, playing an active role in securing peace between Syria and Israel would help restore America's image as a force for peace and stability in the region.

One argument put forth against U.S. engagement contends that Syria is not serious about peace and that any engagement would mean appeasement and would reward Syria for bad behavior. This is a weak argument because Syria has demonstrated considerable seriousness about a land-for-peace deal since 1991, and by most political and diplomatic measures it is serious now as well. In addition, the United States should maintain sanctions on Syria until Syria changes its policies vis-à-vis Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine, which would have to be part of the phased approach to Syrian-Israeli peace in any case. Engagement on such terms would not constitute appeasement.

The Obama administration should develop an integrated policy to push the Syrian-Israeli track forward by using sticks, carrots, and active diplomacy. The sticks would be a continuation of the Bush administration's policy of pushing and keeping Syria out of Lebanon while also 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 support for the international Hariri tribunal, as well as continued U.S. sanctions for as long as Syria continues to violate its neighbors' sovereignty. This pressure has

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helped push Syria more vigorously toward a peace deal, because peace with Israel is one of the few ways for Syria to break out of its isolation. Indeed there are those in Syria, even within the regime, who favor the maintenance of this pressure, because if it is lifted prematurely, hard-line factions within the regime would be vindicated and would feel less of a need to move forward on the negotiations.

The Bush administration's policy was all stick and no carrot, meaning all threat and no diplomacy. The new administration should pursue a more comprehensive approach. The prize for Syria would be the return of the Golan Heights, and carrots would include ending Syria's political isolation and the U.S.'s help in securing WTO accession and foreign direct investment encouragement. What the carrot must not include, however, is any compromise on Lebanese or Iraqi sovereignty, or any deal on the Hariri tribunal.

Sticks and carrots do not work on their own. Intelligent and strong diplomacy is 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; it will take a particularly gifted and 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 potential downsides of robust U.S. engagement are limited. If a peace treaty is not achieved but talks continue under U.S. mediation, Washington would have more leverage over Syria to encourage it to moderate its policies. If the talks collapse acrimoniously, the United States would not be any worse off than it is today. ■