

US brokers Syria-Israel talks

Jean Shaoul
16 December 1999

President Bill Clinton brought Syria's Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara'a and Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Barak to Washington for a two-day meeting this week in an attempt to broker an agreement between the two countries. This is considered by the US and the Western powers in general as a key step in formally ending hostilities between Israel and the Arab regimes and stabilising economic and political relations throughout the Middle East.

Clinton made the surprise announcement last week that talks between Syria and Israel would resume, after they had broken down nearly four years ago. He said he was hopeful that an agreement could be reached in the next few months.

The Washington meeting follows the US president's personal intervention. It is the first time Syria has agreed to hold such high-level talks with its arch-enemy Israel, which has occupied Syria's Golan Heights since the 1967 Six-Day War. Farouq al-Shara'a said that a peace agreement with Israel was possible within a few months. It would, he said, also pave the way for a settlement between Israel and Lebanon, a portion of whose territory Israel has occupied since 1978.

In seeking to bring a number of long-standing conflicts in the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean to an end, the US is attempting to strengthen its geopolitical interests in this strategic part of the world.

The meeting follows a period of intense negotiations by several of the key players in the region and secret meetings between Syria and Israel in Aqaba, Jordan. US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright paid a two-day visit to Damascus last week, after a series of visits to Middle East capitals, including Beirut, where Syria is the power broker. This was the first official visit from the US since the 1983 bombing of US marines in Lebanon. Syria had previously sent a 15-member trade delegation to the US, the first in more than 20 years, to promote trade between the two countries.

In October, Israeli Prime Minister Barak went to Turkey to discuss defence and water issues. His visit followed meetings between Syria and Turkey, which has long had strained relations with its Arab neighbour. Disputes include Syria's claims to the Turkish province of Hatay and support for the Kurdish separatists, which led Turkey last year to threaten to invade Syria. Turkey's \$32 billion plan to build 22 dams on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers would deprive Syria of much of its water supply. Damascus's expulsion of Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan last year, which led to his capture by the Turkish authorities, eased tensions over the Kurdish issue.

Although for years Syria insisted that the Golan Heights could only be won back by force, in practice there has been a general peace since 1973. Once Egypt, and later Jordan, had made their

peace with Israel any attempt by Syria to go it alone was out of the question.

There are several important issues in the Syria-Israel talks:

* *The Golan Heights*: The Syrians have demanded that the Israelis pull back from Golan and return to the pre-1967 borders. This area involves some 460 square miles of territory and is home to 17,000 Israeli settlers and a similar number of Druze villagers. It would mean the evacuation of Israeli settlements and give the Syrians access to the Sea of Galilee, Israel's main source of water. Before the talks broke down in 1995, then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin promised these concessions verbally in return for a peace agreement and security arrangements. But the extent of any Israeli withdrawal has been one of the main stumbling blocks to a resumption of talks. Polls say 75 percent of Israelis are opposed to full withdrawal.

* *Security Arrangements*: The Golan's strategic importance to Israel is very limited; any Israeli forces defending the Golan would be operating with their backs to a steep escarpment, while Syrian forces descending the Heights would be vulnerable to Israeli guns. What the Israelis want is to keep their early-warning radar stations on Mount Hermon. According to recent Israeli press reports, the Syrians may agree to these warning stations being manned by a US force. Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was quoted as saying that President Assad of Syria had secretly agreed to his demand for continued Israeli control of Mount Hermon.

* *Lebanon*: Barak made an electoral pledge to withdraw Israeli forces occupying southern Lebanon by July 7 next year. Since 1985, Israel has occupied an 11-mile "security zone" to protect its northern borders from attacks by Hezbollah, a Shiite Moslem group backed by Iran, fighting to dislodge Israel from Lebanon. But without first making an agreement with Syria—which has 35,000 troops stationed in the Beka'a valley—a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon would leave a power vacuum and Israel would, according to government and military spokesmen, be vulnerable to attacks from Hezbollah. By itself, the Lebanese army is incapable of bringing the south under control. While Syria could control the south, Israel would not permit this in the absence of a comprehensive settlement. Hence a deal over Lebanon is a vital piece in the complex mosaic.

Such a deal means that Syria and Lebanon would have to police the Palestinian refugee camps in southern Lebanon, from whence Hezbollah operates. Hezbollah oppose Yassir Arafat's "land for peace" agreements with Israel that would abandon the refugees, and have launched numerous rocket attacks against Israel from the refugee camps. Until very recently, Iranian arms supplied to Hezbollah were being routed via Damascus. According to reports

in the Israeli press, they are now bypassing Syria and going straight to Beirut, suggesting that Assad has cut off aid to Hezbollah.

Lebanon and Syria have promised to work side by side in any negotiations and a Lebanese delegation is expected to join in further talks, after the first round of talks between Israel and Syria is completed. A Syria-Lebanon agreement would isolate Israel's Palestinian opponents and make it easier for Israel to cement its relations with Arafat. It would give Syria increased control over Lebanon which, together with Palestine, was once part of Syria under Ottoman rule. It would also put pressure on Iran, which stands to lose a considerable amount of influence in the region. Hezbollah has already announced that it will stage further attacks on Israel in an attempt to undermine the Middle East negotiations.

* *Water:* Water, not land, is the critical issue between Syria and Israel. The Golan provides more than 12 percent of Israel's water. According to *Al-Hayat*, the US had sought and won agreement from Ankara to negotiate with Damascus for a final statement on Turkey and Syria sharing the Euphrates' waters. The possibility has also been discussed of constructing a pipeline under the sea to bring water to Israel.

* *Diplomatic normalisation and opening of frontiers:* At the heart of the entire Middle East peace process are attempts to establish normal diplomatic relations and facilitate the free movement of capital, industry and trade. The 50-year Arab-Israeli conflict has fragmented economic relations in a region that once formed a single province under Ottoman rule. These conflicts constitute barriers to trade and investment that the multinational corporations and banks want to see removed.

Shares on the Israeli stock exchange rose 4 percent in anticipation that trade and investment would increase following peace with Syria. The government is drawing up plans to compensate the 17,000 Israeli settlers, some of whom are opposed to a withdrawal.

David Brodet, former director general of the finance ministry, told Israeli radio that the civilian compensation would cost \$3-4 billion, while rebuilding military installations would also run into billions. Since Israel would be unable to pay, the expectation was that the US would pick up the tab, as it did after Camp David and the Wye Accords. This will be vital if Barak is to secure a majority in the referendum planned should an agreement with Syria be reached.

69-year-old Hafez al-Assad, Syria's president since 1970, is keen to reach an accommodation with Israel. His health failing, he wants to win back the Golan Heights, which Syria lost when he was defence minister, and thereby secure his own power base and his son Bashir's succession, against a faction allied to Iran.

Syria's flagging economy has undermined Assad's political support. The collapse of the Soviet Union was also a severe blow. Petroleum production, revenues and reserves have declined and foreign aid from other Arab states, upon which Syria depended since it was defeated by Israel in 1973, has all but dried up.

Growth in per capita gross domestic product has declined since the 1970s, and in the last two years has gone into reverse. Workers' wages average a mere \$100 per month, and social and political discontent is mounting.

Opening up the Syrian market to manufactured goods has led to factory closures and job losses. In 1991, Assad's Baathist regime passed an investment law to encourage private investment in Syria's economy, which is dominated by state-owned enterprises. But in the absence of Western commercial laws and a free movement of capital, little investment has materialised. Earlier this year Assad spoke of extending the 1991 law to allow foreign investment, modernise the banking system and introduce a new commercial code.

But he is treading a fine line. Economic reforms will strengthen the financial elite and undermine his own Baathist and Alawite-Muslim power base, while at the same time running the risk of unleashing opposition from the Shi'ite masses who stand to lose their livelihoods. If Assad is willing to reach a deal with Israel, it must be in the expectation of receiving generous economic aid from the US.

Both Syria and Israel realise they must secure Washington's support in the brief period before the American presidential election gets going in earnest. The search for such an agreement marks a *volte-face* in US policy, which has long opposed Syria. It signifies an acceptance that a settlement with Syria is a prerequisite to a realignment of relations in the region that goes far beyond the present Middle East "peace process".

If the US can clinch a Syria-Israel agreement, other key Arab states including Morocco, Tunisia, Oman and Kuwait and eventually Saudi Arabia are likely to sign peace treaties with Israel. This will make it more costly for Iraq, Iran, Libya and Sudan to maintain their opposition. It should also calm relations between Turkey and Syria and smooth the path for implementing the Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

As the *Nixon Center Bulletin* (July 27, 1999) put it: "Why should the United States care so much about this? Very simply, the US still has major strategic interests in the region that go beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict. As long as Syria, Israel, and Palestinians are at odds, American political influence throughout the Arab Gulf is weakened and plays into the hands of the rejectionists in Iraq and Iran. These two states will likely be easier to deal with once the Arab-Israeli problem is put aside. A comprehensive 'peace' will provide the US with a much broader base from which to assert its interests and support its friends."

The bulletin made the further point that "The consequences of such a peace are being debated with great intensity in capitals as diverse as Teheran, Ankara, Cairo and Islamabad."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact