Israel and Syria announce negotiations amid ongoing US-Israeli threats to Iran

Peter Symonds
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Israel and Syria announced last Wednesday that negotiations via Turkish mediators were underway for a comprehensive peace treaty. Far from being a step toward lowering regional tensions, the move is a transparent attempt on Israel's part at detaching Syria from its ally Iran amid ongoing threats of an attack against Tehran by the Israeli and/or US military.

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni spelled out the terms in comments on Thursday, declaring that "the Syrians also need to understand that [a peace deal] means full renunciation of their support of terrorism—of Hezbollah, of Hamas and of its problematic relations with Iran". The unstated quid pro quo would be the return of the Golan Heights seized from Syria during the 1967 war.

While Israel is certainly seeking to choke off support for the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas, the chief aim is to rupture relations between Syria and Iran. According to the *Wall Street Journal*: "Israeli officials say Syria's secular government is fundamentally averse to its strategic alliance with Iran's Islamist rulers. They say Damascus needs to be offered economic and diplomatic incentives to offset the assistance supplied by Iran."

Damascus responded with an editorial in the state-run *Tishrin* newspaper stating "there should be no preconditions in the negotiations" and that "Syria's international ties are not negotiable". The statement appears to be little more than an attempt to placate Iran as well as public opinion at home. Having agreed to talks, the Syrian government is well aware that Israel will be insisting on firm security guarantees in return for any handover of the strategic Golan Heights.

The announcement has provoked opposition in Israel, including within the government. Eli Yishai, the trade minister and leader of the extremist Shas party, opposed any deal, saying: "Syria is still the foundation of the axis of evil, and I am not sure it is appropriate to transfer Israel's northern front to the axis of evil." A television poll found that 70 percent of respondents oppose withdrawing from the Golan Heights as part of an agreement with Syria, with only 22 percent in favour.

The Israeli government's critics are well aware what Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is seeking to do, but are sceptical that it can be achieved. "You have to make a cold assessment whether Israel could drive a wedge between Syria and Iran," Dore Gold, president of the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs, told the *New York Times*. "Unfortunately, in the present period, Iran has Syria within its grip to a far greater extent than it did in the 1990s when previous negotiations with the Syrians were held."

Some commentators have speculated that the negotiations with Syria are something of a setback to the Bush administration, which has previously opposed such a step. The *New York Times* reported last Thursday that US officials "feared such a negotiation would appear to reward Syria at a time when the United States was seeking to isolate it for its meddling in Lebanon and its backing of Hezbollah." One Bush administration official described the announcement as "a slap in the face".

Whatever tactical differences may exist, Israel and the US share a common objective of splitting Syria from Iran, as the military drumbeat against Tehran continues. Israel is quite prepared to use the stick as well as the carrot. Last September Israel launched an air strike on a building in Syria's eastern desert in a graphic demonstration of its ability and willingness to attack wherever and whenever it pleased. Effectively sanctioning the raid, the Bush administration released

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intelligence last month purportedly proving that Damascus was building a nuclear reactor at the site—a menacing threat to the nuclear facilities in neighbouring Iran.

The US has pursued its own efforts to drive a wedge between Syria and Iran. At an international conference last May in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice pointedly held a discussion with Syrian Foreign Minister Moallem while shunning his Iranian counterpart despite the fact that Washington brands both countries as "state sponsors of terrorism". Last November, Syria was invited to, and attended, the international summit organised by the Bush administration in Annapolis, which, behind the cover of Israeli-Palestinian peace, aimed to further isolate Iran.

Iran was clearly at the top of the agenda when President Bush visited Israel earlier this month. He told the Israeli parliament on May 15: "American stands with you in firmly opposing Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions... For the sake of peace, the world must not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon." While the White House later dismissed press reports that an attack on Iran had been discussed, Olmert's spokesman Mark Regev confirmed that the two leaders were "on the same page" and understood that "tangible action" was needed to block Iran's supposed drive to build a nuclear weapon.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is due to circulate its latest report on Iran's nuclear programs this week. Even before the report was released, Rice and her British counterpart, Foreign Secretary David Milliband, last week again demanded that Iran come clean, and threatened a new round of economic and diplomatic sanctions. Last December, a National Intelligence Estimate by US spy agencies found that Iran had halted any nuclear weapons research program in 2003—a conclusion that Bush has effectively dismissed.

Publicly, the Bush administration and the Olmert government still pay lip service to the need for a "diplomatic solution" to the standoff with Iran. Behind the scenes, however, discussion continues about military strikes on Iranian nuclear sites prior to the end of Bush's term of office.

In an article entitled "Bombing Iran: the Clamor Persists", *Time* magazine commented: "Listening to the questions of General David Petraeus in the Senate [last] Thursday, you might think the US was heading for a new war in the Gulf. Senators from both sides of the aisle spent as much time asking him about Iran as they did about Iraq and Afghanistan." In testimony to the congressional hearing, Petraeus supported diplomatic efforts but declared that military action against Iran should be kept as a "last resort".

Despite White House denials, Bush clearly had discussions in Israel over a military attack on Iran. A senior Israeli official told *Time*: "A military option is not a good option. But there's only one thing worse than that, which is Iran going nuclear." The article also cited the remarks of Yossi Kuperwasser, a former senior Israeli intelligence officer, who warned that it would soon be too late to act against Iran's nuclear programs. Referring to military strikes on Iran, he said: "Just do it. For Christ's sake, do it and solve our problem."

Yesterday's *Scotsman on Sunday* pointed to the discussion in Israeli circles on the need to take action if the Bush administration failed to do so. An Israeli official told the newspaper: "It's certainly not an option to be taken lightly, but at the end of the day, we may decide it is the only option we have." Former Israeli national security adviser Giora Eiland made a similar point, saying: "Within a year, the Israeli government will have to decide between two options: either not do anything and reconcile itself to the fact that Iran is now nuclear, or take military action."

Eiland insisted that the decision to open negotiations with Syria was an unrelated issue. But clearly if Israel were able to split Damascus away from Tehran, then Iran would be left more isolated and vulnerable to attack—whether by Israel or the US or both.

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