The Syria-Israel talks: old themes, new setting

By Carsten Wieland,
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The flow of rumour, speculation and argument about negotiations between Syria and Israel has oscillated over many years and around many occasions. Even at times of the highest tensions, close observers of the region would be able to make a sure bet that some kind of channel (as informal or as indirect as it may be) between these adversaries remained open. This makes the most recent revelation of intermediated peace talks between Syria and Israel, on 21 May 2008 [1], less surprising than the often breathless reportage and commentary that accompanies the news suggests. The question, now that an expectant world has had time to digest the story, is whether this phase represents a new beginning or merely a rehashing of old constellations and positions.

A first inspection might favour scepticism. It is difficult to imagine a new take on such issues as the Golan heights, security guarantees, or demanding that Syria renounce terrorism. After all, previous negotiations have addressed these issues in the form of a demilitarised zone in the Golan and the creation of a natural park, and even clear borders between the two states.

Moreover, a deal between Syria and Israel was within close reach in the January 2000 negotiations in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. United States participants testified that Syria's then president, Hafez al-Assad, had made exceptionally far-reaching concessions in security issues and in matters of normalising relations (involving, for example, diplomatic exchange and trading across open borders). But his counterpart, prime minister Ehud Barak sensed growing opposition [2] among the Israeli population to the return of the Golan heights to Syria. Barak retreated [3] from compromise on this crucial issue and on a commitment to a complete withdrawal to the borders of 4 June 1967 [4]. Syria saw this as a betrayal. These negotiations were a missed opportunity.

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>
> Also by Carsten Wieland in **openDemocracy**:
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> "Syria's quagmire, al-Assad's tunnel [1]" (9 November 2006)
>
> "The Syrian conundrum [1]" (16 April 2007)

In Geneva in March 2000, the then US president Bill Clinton made an attempt [5] on Barak's behalf to persuade the terminally ill Hafez al-Assad to surrender land east of Lake Genezaret that had - according to the international borders of 1923 - belonged to Syria before 1967 [6] (and in which the Syrian leader had reputedly splashed around as a child. Al-Assad remained unbending in what proved to be the last big decision of his life. He refused to take part in any further discussions and in a rage flew back to Damascus where he died on 10 June 2000.

The difficulties then notwithstanding, peace talks and possible compromises looked more plausible in 2000 than they do today [7], when the circumstances [8]of any negotiations are far more difficult. Even a few years ago - say, before the 2003 war in Iraq (after which Syria drifted further away [9] from the orbit of western politics) or as recently as before the Hizbollah-Israel war in Lebanon in summer 2006, the respective states' positions did not seem as entrenched as in 2008.

A change in the weather

In the intervening period, seven developments have occurred which make a rapprochement [10]look more remote than before:

* Any Israeli government will have a harder time now selling to its voters the idea of giving up another stretch of occupied land, after parts of the country have experienced relentless shelling from the Gaza strip after Israel's withdrawal in August 2005. The strength of Hizbollah [10] on the northern border after the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon in May 2000 - exemplified in the 2006 war - further contributes to induce a sense of insecurity in the Israeli public

* Israel's negotiations with authorities in the Palestinian territories as a whole are much more difficult after the intra-Palestinian split between Fatah and Hamas. Indeed, on both sides, insecurity and unpredictability rule the agenda

* Both the Israeli [11]and the Syrian governments are, for different reasons, at present relatively weak and threatened by domestic adversaries. But peace talks need strong governments that can fulfil their promises and persuade their people to accept tough decisions

* After the war in Iraq, Syria has increasingly drifted towards making alliances with anti-western actors such as Iran [12], and even Venezuela and North Korea. This is mainly due to a lack of foreign-policy alternatives after isolationist measures from the United States and its allies - fuelled by Washington's manichean "war on terror" and by the European Union's disillusionment with Syrian politics

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* To ask Syria to cut its links with Iran and Hizbollah is an even harder demand after Hizbollah's demonstration of force against its domestic adversaries in May 2008, which enabled it to acquire an increased veto-capacity within Lebanon's delicate political fabric (see Robert G Rabil, "Hizbollah and Lebanon: the curse of a state [12]", 21 May 2008). In addition, Syria's oil reserves are fading, while Iraq, Iran and Venezuela's strong resources have increased their own strategic importance

* The post-2006 political developments in Lebanon have encouraged Syria partially to regain its lost grip on its close neighbour [13], with the help of Hizbollah. However, whereas Syria was the main actor in this relationship during the Hafez al-Assad [14] era, the roles now have changed: Syria seems to need Hizbollah more than Hizbollah needs Syria

* In contrast to 2000, the Israel-Syria talks are not sponsored by the United States. Moreover, they are taking place in counterposition to the foreign-policy concept of George W Bush, who insists on ignoring and isolating "rogue states" on the extended "axis of evil" instead of engaging them. Indeed, Israel has turned more pragmatic than its most important ally.

An unsettled climate

These seven developments offer solid reasons for pessimism. Yet the present situation is less wholly bleak than dialectical - requiring careful inspection to locate the kinds of initiative that could genuinely shift matters forward. Two points in particular (at first sight contradictory) can be made here: peace efforts in the region can only become stable and sustainable if an overall solution is found that includes *all* actors in Israel, the Palestinian territories, Syria and Lebanon, since they are so interrelated; yet it is an advantage that the Syrian and the Palestinian portfolios have been separated [15].

In May 2003, Hazez al-Assad's son and successor [16] Bashar al-Asad promised to accept any decision by the Palestinian leadership in peace negotiations with Israel. Until then, Syria had always officially insisted on co-representing the Palestinians, though in the January 2000 peace negotiations with Israel in West Virginia, Hafez al-Assad had already secretly signalled that he would accept a peace settlement even if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had not been satisfactorily resolved.

This strategy of pragmatism concerning the Palestinian issue could help to break the vicious circle. However, the Syrian political analyst Samir Altaqi [17]said in an interview in November 2003: "Syria is not able to make any further concessions (in the Palestinian issue) ... This would harm the regime's identity." Altaqi himself is now said to be part of the negotiation team with Israel.

Bashar al-Assad [18] signalled his readiness to hold talks with Israel in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war; he has repeated his offer several times since (most prominently at the end of 2003, and despite the continuation of the second Palestinian *intifada*). He is said to have sent his younger brother Maher al-Assad to Amman for secret negotiations with Israeli representatives.

As tensions and hopes run high, every incident, no matter how minute, is subject to worldwide public scrutiny. This was certainly true of the first handshake between a Syrian and an Israeli president, which took place at the funeral of Pope John Paul II on 9 April 2005, in Rome. When speculation arose, the Syrians hastened to clarify that this gesture between Bashar al-Assad and Iranian-born Moshe Katzav was nothing but "a formality".

In Israel, especially within the intelligence community and within moderate political camps, there have been more voices calling for serious negotiations with Syria, though with no preconditions. Syria had always insisted on resuming negotiations at the point where the two sides had broken off in March 2000. Under these conditions, Syria would regain the entire Golan heights [19] in line with the borders of 1967.

At the end of 2003, Bashar al-Assad surprisingly dropped this condition - which was based on a promise from the assassinated Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin - thus placing Israel in a temporary predicament. Bashar directed his strategy toward Washington in order to demonstrate his goodwill and avert pressure on Syria. He has reaffirmed his readiness to negotiate without preconditions several times, as in the speech to parliament in Damascus on 5 March 2005, when he announced the withdrawal [19]of Syrian troops from Lebanon.

The Syrian minister of expatriates, Buthaina Shaaban, insisted in an interview in 2004 that "Syria would be prepared to resume peace negotiations today if only the United States would induce Israel to negotiate." But Washington has not been interested, she continued, because it wants to hold on to arguments for putting pressure on Syria in the "war on terrorism." Until now, Israel has had no major interest in peace negotiations because it would rather wait and see how much US pressure is softening up Syria, which would strengthen the Israeli position in negotiations over the Golan heights.

However, after the overt failure of the Bush administration's policy in the middle east (and beyond), Israel has wisely decided to go its own way. Above all, it is both in Israel's and even in the US's interest not to undermine a stable regime in the neighbourhood (which is a reversal of the widespread regime-change rhetoric after the invasion into Iraq). A toppling of Bashar al-Assad and his clique in Damascus could result in an outcome that is even worse from the perspective of Israel's national interest. Despite all, the Ba'ath regime is still a secular player [20] with a strong record of pragmatism in crucial issues, as well as a history of stern opposition to Islamist militants.

A crescent in the sky

It will not be easy to follow up the failed negotiations of 2000 when a "normalisation" of relations was part of the package. A step-by-step approach focusing on security guarantees and terrorism issues first seems more likely, if at all. Maybe it is not even so bad that the United States does not play an active role in the rapprochement this time, but has acceded its place to a regional actor: Turkey. Washington and Europe's efforts have failed in the past; now there is a first opportunity [21] for a purely regional constellation to be given a chance.

Turkey is respected by Israel because of its long-term membership of Nato, and as a traditional US ally. More recently, Turkey has gained respect among Arabs and Muslims in the region because it is the only country in which democracy and Islam have combined in a fruitful relationship. The ruling AKP's foreign policy has focused on rekindling Turkey's relationships with neighbouring states, above all Syria. Turkey serves as a model for moderate and for even more conservative Islamic opposition movements in the region's (mostly secular) dictatorships.

This political and strategic constellation is a novelty. It may also become the foundation of an integral approach in this battered region - and at least be given a chance [22] to do so. By the time the United States has its new president in January 2009, a new momentum and new confidence-building ideas may just come from this direction also. If the constellation survives intact over the next critical period, the Syria-Israel talks may become more than a footnote to history. But it is a big "if".

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