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Israel and Syria: a chance at reconciliation

There are signs Syria is prepared to talk peace with Israel. It's an opportunity that the U.S. and Israel can't afford to miss.

By Nick Bunzl

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Rumors of war, and of peace, often go hand in hand in the Middle East. Unfortunately, over the last few months on the Israeli- **Syrian** front, the former have dominated. Reports of **Iran** delivering an advanced radar system to Syria, the

transfer by Syria of Scud missiles to Hezbollah, and the February tripartite summit between Iranian **President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**, Syrian President **Bashar Assad** and Hezbollah head Hassan Nasrallah all signal a reinvigorated military partnership. However, Assad also has been sending subtle signals that he is prepared to talk with **Israel**.

It is an opportunity that Israel, and the United States, cannot afford to miss.

Since the flotilla incident off the **Gaza Strip** in May, Assad has delivered pragmatic messages supporting renewed dialogue. In a news conference with Spanish Prime Minister **Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero**, Assad lamented what the recent Israel- **Turkey** rift means for the latter's role as a mediator between Israel and Syria. The Turkish mediating role "is built on the relationship between Turkey and Israel and the relationship between Turkey and Syria. Any mediator must have good ties with both parties," he said.

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Turkey's mediation efforts in December 2008 reportedly were making headway until Israel launched Operation Cast Lead in the **Gaza Strip**. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan felt betrayed that his efforts were thwarted by Israel's actions. Turkish-Israeli ties have deteriorated ever since, reaching

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a low point when Israeli commandos killed nine Turkish citizens on a boat in the Gaza-bound flotilla.

The **Obama** administration has made a concerted effort to engage Syria, sending a delegation of technology executives and **State Department** officials, and nominating an ambassador (who is awaiting Senate confirmation). But at the same time, the **White House** renewed sanctions. Thus far, the U.S. has primarily devoted its peacemaking efforts to the Israeli-Palestinian track.

Recent reports that **Sen. Arlen Specter** (D-Pa.) was asked by Assad to help get peace talks with Israel back on track suggest that now is the time to see if the White House's engagement with Syria can turn into meaningful movement toward an Israeli-Syrian agreement.

There are significant voices within the Israeli defense and intelligence establishments in support of moving forward with negotiations, including that of Defense Minister **Ehud Barak**. And as Aluf Benn noted recently in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, Assad has maintained "internal stability" and, in the face of the 2007 bombing by Israel of a suspected nuclear reactor in Syria, he has proved to be "a rational and restrained leader." It is clear that to create any meaningful Israeli-Syrian dialogue, the negotiation table must be set with the biggest carrot of all, the Golan Heights. If talks fail and Syria continues to engage in disruptive behavior in the region, then sticks should be considered.

For Obama, Israeli-Syrian negotiations offer an indirect way to support the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and have much merit in their own right. Movement between Syria and Israel can achieve a tangible U.S. objective, recast the pall over the region and strengthen U.S. leadership. And through a U.S.-led effort to realize a Syrian-Israeli agreement, the Syrians can be encouraged to play a constructive role in Iraq as the **U.S. military** presence is drawn down.

For Israel, an Israeli-Syrian accord containing the necessary guarantees would greatly strengthen security along its northern border, substantially dilute Syria's support for **Hamas** and Hezbollah and signify Israel's renewed preparedness to establish peace with its neighbors utilizing the land-for-peace formula.

For Syria, an agreement might lead to its regaining the Golan Heights and reconciling with the United States.

Even more, an Israeli-Syrian deal would provide a useful strategic backdrop against which to reinvigorate the Arab peace initiative as a comprehensive framework to put an end to the broader Arab-Israeli conflict.

As in any scenario where there are winners, there are also losers. Chief among these would be Iran and its Lebanese offspring, Hezbollah. Hamas, with its base of support in Damascus, would be put under renewed pressure.

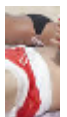
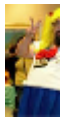
Still, the U.S. should move forward forcefully on the path to reconcile Syria and Israel. The potential gains far outweigh the risks.

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