

Even Sharon Allowed Israel-Syria Talks

by Dean Andromidas

As Vice President Dick Cheney was plotting new wars against Iran and Syria, the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* on Jan. 16 revealed that secret back-channel talks were held between the two nations' representatives from September 2004 to July 2006. According to *Ha'aretz's* senior correspondent Akiva Eldar, the talks were approved by the governments of both Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, and continued even during the first phase of last Summer's Israel-Lebanon War. The Israeli and Syrian teams were able to produce a draft agreement, providing the four "pillars" of a durable peace: "security, water, normalization, and borders." The unsigned draft agreement included the following major points;

- Sovereignty over the Golan Heights to the lines of June 4, 1967 would be returned to Syria. A mutually agreed territorial borderline would be guaranteed by the U.S. and the United Nations.

- A "Framework Agreement" for the implementation of a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, arrangements for security, including early warning stations, the establishment of normal diplomatic relations, etc. The state of belligerency between the two states would end with the signing of this agreement. The time frame of its implementation remained open, with the Syrians proposing 5 years and the Israelis 15 years.

- A peace treaty would be signed following the completion of the above agreement.

- Israel would retain control of the disposition of the waters of Lake Tiberius and the Upper Jordan River, while Syria would be guaranteed access to these waters for residential purposes and for fishing.

- The establishment of a buffer zone along the Israeli-Syrian border with the creation of a Syrian national park on the Golan Heights. While the park would be fully under the sovereignty of the Syrian government, Israeli citizens would have visa-free access to the park for daytime visits.

While the document is described as a "non-paper," and therefore lacks legal standing, its significance is political. It was prepared in August 2005, and updated during meetings held in Europe over the course of the negotiations. The discussions continued even during the recent Lebanese-Israeli War, and were only broken off after the Syrian demand that the discussions become official, and proceed on the level of Deputy Minister, was rejected by Israel. It is significant to note that in July 2006, within days of the outbreak of the war, Vice

President Dick Cheney and his neo-con allies were demanding that Israel attack Syria, a demand that was rejected.

The office of Prime Minister Olmert denied any knowledge of the Syrian-Israeli back-channel talks, and the Syrian government denied that any "negotiations" ever took place.

According to *Ha'aretz*, the idea for discussion began in January 2004, when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad made an official visit to Turkey. During that visit, Dr. Alon Liel happened to be staying at the same hotel as the Syrian delegation. Apparently, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan took the initiative to serve as a mediator to open a channel between Liel and the Syrians. Upon his return to Israel, Liel, who confirmed that such talks took place, was told by the Turkish Ambassador to Israel that Assad had asked Erdogan to use his good offices to open a channel to Syria.

Liel then brought Geoffrey Aronson, from the Washington-based Foundation for Middle East Peace, into the process;

EIR Queries White House

EIR's White House correspondent Bill Jones on Jan. 16 asked White House spokesman Tony Snow about the revelations in Ha'aretz that Israel and Syria had conducted secret peace negotiations between 2004 and 2006, that were undermined by the Bush Administration. Here is the exchange:

EIR: Tony, there were reports in the Israeli press by Akiva Eldar that between 2004 and 2006 there were back-channel discussions going on between Israel and Syria, and they were at the point that they had a draft agreement for the two countries to sign, but pressure from the United States led to the Israelis backing down from that, and subsequently to the attacks into Lebanon. If that, indeed, is the case—

Snow: Wait, you're saying that the failure to talk with Syria led to the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier, which then produced attacks? . . .

EIR: What Akiva Eldar is saying is that the Israelis and the Syrians were on the brink of an agreement to resolve the differences between those two countries, and that pressure from the United States kept them from actually moving in that direction.

Snow: Honestly, I haven't seen the report. It sounds—I'm a little dubious about it, but rather than sticking my neck out and trying to be definitive, give me some time to look into it, and I'll give you a straight answer. Call me this afternoon.

Aronson, in turn, suggested bringing Syrian businessman Ibrahim (Ayebe) Suleiman into the project. The latter, who is based in Washington, comes from the same Alawite village as the Assad family, and has been involved in mediating between Damascus and Washington quite often. Suleiman was able to win the support of unnamed Syrian representatives, while Liel was able to involve Israeli representatives.

The two sides then engaged in unofficial discussions on the “academic” level. An unnamed European mediator became involved and was subsequently revealed by Meretz Party Chairman Yossi Beilin to have been Nicholas Lang, head of the Middle East desk at the Swiss Foreign Ministry. Lang had previously played a key role in the Geneva Peace Accord which was drafted by Beilin and Palestinian negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo. Alon Liel is said to be a very close associate of Beilin as well. Lang had reportedly also met with Shalom Turjeman, Olmert’s top advisor, who told Lang that Israel had no interest in the talks. Lang also met with Syrian Vice President Farouk Shara, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, and a senior official in Syrian intelligence on several occasions. The Swiss Foreign Ministry provided financial support and hosted several of the discussion sessions in that country.

Bush Administration Sabotage

The final meeting of the two sides took place during the Lebanese-Israeli War, when Suleiman said that the Syrians felt the back channel had run its course and suggested upgrading the talks to the level of Deputy Minister. The Syrians also asked U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch to participate. These suggestions were rejected, thus ending the back channel.

A senior Israeli source, who had been involved in the discussions, commented that the “non-paper” agreement is still important, not so much because of its content, but because it demonstrates that an agreement could be reached if there were the political will on the part of Syrian and Israeli leaders, and if there were constructive backing by the United States.

Another source said that the requirements for a Syria-Israel peace process include a willingness on the part of Israel to give up the Golan Heights; for Syria to give up its support of Hamas and Hezbollah; and for the U.S. to remove Syria from the “Axis of Evil.” The draft agreement, the source said, demonstrates that Syria and Israel are prepared to implement the first two, but the Bush Administration refuses to implement the third requirement, and that is what is blocking an agreement.

An editorial in *Ha’aretz* on Jan. 17 called on Olmert to open negotiations and convince the Bush Administration of their necessity. “Olmert is obligated to determine whether the U.S. is indeed a barrier to negotiations with Syria. If this is in fact the case, the Prime Minister must make an effort to persuade President Bush that removing Syria from the region’s cycle of violence is an Israeli and American interest of the highest order.”