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By Stephen Zunes

The Peace Process Between Israel and Syria

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Key Points

- The U.S. role as a superpower with strong strategic and economic interests in the region often conflicts with its role as mediator in the Israeli-Syrian peace process.
- Syria has moderated its once-belligerent posture toward the Israelis and is now closer to accepting the existence of Israel and living in peace, particularly if the Palestinians are allowed a viable state alongside Israel.
- The United States has maintained its strong support for Israel's negotiating position, even though Israel now takes a more hard-line posture than its autocratic neighbor.

The U.S. has long considered Syria the most intractable of Israel's front-line neighbors due to its autocratic government, links to terrorists, and virulent anti-Israel posture. However, a variety of factors—both international and domestic—have led this one-time rejectionist government to pursue a peace agreement with its long-time enemy. Syria's less belligerent stance toward Israel is not as much a result of greater American influence in this former Soviet client-state as it is a reflection of the more pragmatic drift of Arab parties that has been evolving since the mid-1970s. The Syrians supported, albeit not uncritically, the U.S. government in its war against Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in 1991 and have also backed the current campaign against the al Qaeda terrorist network.

In the Syrian case, this process has been hastened by the end of large-scale Soviet military support combined with U.S. determination to provide Israel with a qualitative military advantage. The death of long-time dictator Hafez Assad in 2000 and his replacement by his more pragmatic son has not led to the radical reforms once hoped for, but he does appear to be more moderate than his father.

The dramatic political and economic shifts in the Arab world resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union, the demise of left-leaning Arab nationalist movements, and the U.S.-dominated post-Gulf War system, have created a situation where Syria cannot reap as much political capital in provoking conflict with Israel as it had previously. However, the Israelis seem far less willing to take the necessary steps to make a negotiated settlement possible, and the U.S. likewise appears unwilling to push its ally to compromise. The recent escalation of Israeli-Palestinian violence has also tempted Syria to resume support for radical secular Palestinian groups that feel vindicated as a result of the breakdown of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

In 1976, with quiet U.S. support, Syria invaded Lebanon to prevent a victory by left-wing nationalist forces backed by Palestinian exiles. The Syrians played a balance-of-power role between the contending factions until the Lebanese civil war ended in 1990. U.S. forces brought into Lebanon following Israel's 1982 invasion clashed with Syrian forces on several occasions prior to the U.S. withdrawal in 1984. Syria maintains a visible military presence in Lebanon and effectively controls the country's foreign affairs. The U.S. would like to support a more independent government in Lebanon, traditionally one of the more pro-Western Arab states.

At the center of the Syrian dispute with Israel is the Golan Heights, the southwestern corner of Syria, which Israel has occupied since 1967. The Syrians have agreed to demilitarize the Golan, allow for international

monitors, and provide other security guarantees in return for an Israeli withdrawal. The Israelis, however, have still not committed to totally withdraw.

Despite an international outcry, the Israelis have effectively annexed the territory, announcing its direct administration under Israeli law as of 1981, contrasting with their ongoing military rule of parts of the Gaza Strip and most of the West Bank. The Golan's fertile farmland, generous water resources, and strategic topography make it difficult, in the minds of many Israelis, to give up this territory. In addition, Israeli failure to withdraw flouts longstanding principle in international law regarding the inadmissibility of territorial acquisition by force, re-stated in the preamble of UN Security Council Resolution 242, which the U.S. has long insisted be the basis of the peace talks.

During the 1980s U.S. policy was geared toward confronting Syria. President Ronald Reagan's National Security Council advocated a tough policy of challenging Syria with both American and Israeli military power. Indeed, there has long been great hostility toward the Syrian government in the United States and little support for its insistence on ending Israel's occupation of the Golan, despite formal U.S. endorsement of the concept of "land for peace" as spelled out in UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338.

Syria was long considered by Washington to be unreasonably hard-lined for its rejection of these resolutions. Now that Syria has dramatically moderated its policies and has accepted resolutions 242 and 338 as the basis of negotiations, it appears that the U.S. suddenly considers the Syrians to be hard-lined for their insistence on the resolutions' strict implementation. The result is an impasse that can be broken only by a shift in U.S. policy.

Problems with Current U.S. Policy: Key Problems

- For more than three decades, the U.S. has tolerated Israel's ongoing violations of international law and human rights in the occupied Golan.
- U.S. policy has refused to question Israel's exaggerated security concerns regarding its potential withdrawal from Syrian territory.
- The U.S., in backing most of Israel's demands, has gone well beyond the requirements of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, long presented as the basis of the negotiations.

The United States convened peace talks between Syria and Israel in 1991 in Madrid as part of a broader peace process initiated after the Gulf War. Israel broke off the talks in 1996 and resumed negotiations in late 1999. The two sides came close to an agreement in early 2000, but talks broke down regarding the demarcation of the border. The Israeli government of Ariel Sharon, without any apparent U.S. objections, has refused to seriously consider any withdrawal and has not returned to the bargaining table.

The U.S. has poured billions of dollars worth of economic and military assistance to Israel since it seized the Golan Heights in 1967, in part to challenge Syria and its demand for the restoration of its conquered territory. Meanwhile, the U.S. continues to call for the end of Syria's economic boycott of Israel and the normalization of relations while failing to insist upon a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan or even an end to its human rights abuses and the withdrawal of its illegal settlements.

Unlike in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the vast majority of the Arab population in the Golan region was expelled following the Israeli conquest, thus relieving Israel of many of the burdens of occupation. The Syrians expelled from the Golan in 1967 (counting descendants) now number as many as 300,000 and remain refugees in their own country. Only five villages remain, consisting of members of the Druze minority, who engaged in Gandhian-style nonviolent resistance against the occupation in the early 1980s, only to be brutally suppressed by Israeli forces without any apparent U.S. objections.

Few Americans recognize that Syrians are at least as frightened of Israel as Israelis are of Syria. The Israelis have on several occasions bombed Damascus, though the Syrians have never successfully attacked Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. Indeed, Damascus currently remains within range of Israeli artillery. The Israelis, meanwhile, insist that if they withdraw their forces from the Golan, demilitarization must occur exclusively on the Syrian side.

Virtually all official U.S. statements on security issues have focused exclusively on Israeli security concerns, often reiterating that between 1948 and 1967, Syrian gunners would periodically lob shells from the Golan Heights into civilian areas within Israel. However, according to UN peacekeeping forces stationed along the border during that period, Israel engaged in far more cease-fire violations and inflicted far greater civilian casualties than did Syria. Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan acknowledged in his diaries in 1967 there was no clear strategic rationale for seizing the territories, and he later admitted to an Israeli reporter that the Golan was seized out of greed for its waters and fertile farmland. Many contemporary Israeli strategic analysts agree.

Without Soviet support, Syrian military power has fallen dramatically while Israel's has been further strengthened, in large measure with U.S. assistance. Indeed, in this era of medium-range missiles, controlling high ground such as the Golan would not yield Syria a significant military advantage. Despite this—and despite Israel's unprecedented military advantage—successive Israeli governments have convinced much of the Israeli public and Israel's supporters in the United States that retaining this territory is critical to Israel's survival.

The U.S. continues to include Syria on its list of "terrorist states," even though the State Department has admitted they have no evidence of the Syrian government being linked to any terrorist attacks since 1986. Being on the list denies Syria access to foreign aid and certain high-technology imports. Washington has offered to remove Syria from the list only if it makes peace with Israel largely on U.S.-Israeli terms.

Given that Israel is widely viewed in the U.S. as a pro-Western democracy and that Syria is a dictatorship that once had close ties with the Soviets, there has been an understandable bias in the U.S. toward Israel in the peace process. This perspective is compounded by the fact that for most of Israel's history, the Syrians refused to negotiate, financed terrorist groups that attacked Israeli civilians, and sought Israel's destruction. As a result, few Americans recognize the fact that, in the current negotiations, Syria's position is actually more moderate than Israel's, since Syria is more consistent with UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, or "land for peace," which the U.S. pledged would be the basis of the talks when they opened in Madrid in 1991.

The U.S. claims it is being even-handed with Israel and Syria. Yet even taking the "middle ground" between two parties would not be reasonable, since Syria's demand for full withdrawal from the Golan is backed by the explicit edict of a legally binding document on which the peace process is based, while the Israeli demands not yet met by Syria have no such legal basis.

Currently, Congress is considering bipartisan legislation to impose tough sanctions on Syria with the stated aim of halting Syria's alleged support for terrorism. The sanctions would also target what the congressional sponsors refer to as Syria's "occupation" of Lebanon. In addition, the sanctions would aim to stop Syria's development of weapons of mass destruction and to end its importation of Iraqi oil. In doing so, the congressional sponsors of the sanctions measure hope to "hold Syria accountable for its role in the Middle East." Given Israel's sizable arsenal of nuclear and chemical weapons, its repressive occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territory, and widespread attacks against civilians, such a sanctions policy would add more weight to the criticism that U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is not even-handed.

Toward a New Foreign Policy: Key Recommendations

- The United States should place greater emphasis on human rights and international law in dealing with Israel and Syria.
- In seeking a Middle East peace settlement, Washington should not send additional arms to this overly militarized region nor should it compensate Israel for relocating settlers who occupied Syrian land illegally.

- Pressuring the Israeli government for a full withdrawal from occupied Syrian territory in return for security guarantees is in Israel's best interest and is therefore consistent with America's historic commitment to Israel.

To play a reasonably constructive role in seeking a peaceful resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the U.S. should approach any new peace talks from the perspective of upholding UN Security Council resolutions, international law, and the long-term stability of the region and must not succumb to its ideological and geopolitical biases. U.S. leaders must also recognize the enormous progress Syria has made toward making peace with Israel. Thus far, Washington has failed to do either of these. The U.S. must either take a more responsible role as mediator or hand the task over to the United Nations, the European Union, or some other more objective body.

More than 15,000 Israeli settlers have colonized the Golan in defiance both of international law—which prohibits the transfer by the occupying power of its inhabitants into land seized by military force—and of explicit United Nations Security Council resolutions whose enforcement is currently blocked by Washington. Unlike the Jewish settlers on the West Bank—many of whom claim strong religious and historical ties to the region—settlers in the Golan have less emotional attachment and are there more for financial and aesthetic reasons. As a result, despite the protests of a small right-wing minority among them, these settlers could probably be coaxed to leave through generous financial incentives and other government efforts short of forced expulsion.

However, the U.S. should not be expected to pay for this withdrawal. The Clinton administration was reportedly willing to spend up to $17 billion to support a Syrian-Israeli peace agreement. Yet it is doubtful that such a sum would promote peace. As much as $10 billion would go to relocate Israeli settlers from the Golan. Not only is the price tag of approximately $650,000 per settler excessive, but Israel should not be given any money to relocate settlers who built homes illegally on other people's land in violation of international law and UN Security Council resolutions.

Much of the remaining money would come in the form of military aid to Israel, adding still more sophisticated armaments to an already-overmilitarized region. Similar increases in U.S. arms to the region followed peace agreements between Israel and Egypt and between Israel and Jordan. The U.S. already sent an additional $1.4 billion in military assistance to Israel in 1999 as part of the 1998 Wye River Agreement. Instead, Washington should insure that these long-overdue peace agreements result in the demilitarization of the region, as has occurred with most peace treaties historically. If it wants to be helpful, the U.S. should use the peace process as an opportunity to get serious about arms control.

The primary obstacle at this point to Syria making peace with Israel remains the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The Syrian regime, like other autocratic Arab governments historically, has used the plight of the Palestinians to advance its political aims, though it is very unlikely it would risk its own security for the Palestinian cause. Should Israel make peace with Syria, it would also likely make peace with Lebanon, whose foreign policy has essentially been controlled by Damascus since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990. In effect, Israel can have the Golan or it can have peace; it cannot have both. Thus, Israel would be far more secure without the Golan than with it. Many Israelis, including some top military officials, recognize this.

If Washington is really concerned about Israel's security, the U.S. must insist that Israel withdraw from the Golan after receiving reasonable security guarantees from Syria or risk losing U.S. military and economic aid. Without such U.S. pressure on the Israeli government to compromise, it will be hard for any Israeli prime minister to be willing to withdraw.

If there is evidence that Syria still meets the criteria of a terrorist state, it should remain on the list and if it does not, it should be removed. Its classification should not be linked to Syrian capitulation to Israeli demands. Other sanctions should not be imposed unless the U.S. has exhausted other means to effect a change in Syrian policies and such restrictions are applied to all states in the region—including America's allies.

Finally, the United States must make human rights a cornerstone of its Middle East policy, insisting on greater human rights and democracy in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab world while requiring Israel to end its human rights abuses in the occupied territories.