

# Syrian Ambassador to U.S.: We Want Open Talks With Israel

*Dr. Imad Moustapha, Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United States, gave a one-hour live webcast presentation to the Middle East Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars on Dec. 17, 2007, entitled, "U.S., Syria and the Old New Middle East: Confrontation or Cooperation?" The webcast can be viewed at [www.wilson-center.org](http://www.wilson-center.org).*

*Here are the remarks of Dr. Moustapha, including excerpts from the subsequent discussion, transcribed by EIR. Subheads have been added.*

Of course, discussing Syrian-U.S. relationship is not an easy issue, taking into account the difficulties those relations have faced in the past four years. I always, always like to remind my audience, whenever I start a talk, about the fact that relations between Syria and the United States were not confrontational in the past. Yes, we have always had issues with the United States, and the United States had always issues with us, mainly because of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict and the core issue of that conflict, the Palestinian issue. Just a reminder: Despite past difficulties between Syria and the United States, two major landmarks of cooperation should be mentioned, as an example. One of them has to do with the Second Gulf War: When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, our troops were next to your troops in the fight for the liberation of Kuwait. Syrian troops were actually allies to U.S. troops. Sometimes this surprises people, when I tell them this story, because Syria is supposed to be an enemy to the United States, we are supposed to be a "rogue state," not a state that will be in alliance with the United States in one major conflict.

Another important landmark that I always try to remind my audience of, when I discuss U.S.-Syrian relations, has to do with the tragic events of Sept. 11, and the fact that Syria provided a wealth of information and intelligence to the United States, about al-Qaeda. And there is a famous letter, addressed by Secretary Powell, to the United States Congress, in which he "thanks Syria for helping save American lives."

This sort of cooperation was deemed important and vital for the Syrian national interest, for one very important reason, from our perspective: We understand that without the United States of America's involvement in the Middle East peace process, there can be no Middle East peace. The United States happens to be the only country in the whole world that has any



*Dr. Imad Moustapha*

sort of leverage on Israel, because of the tremendous military, financial, political, and diplomatic assistance and aid, support that the United States gives to Israel.

We, in our part of the world, consider this support as being blind, flagrant, and totally, totally biased. And sometimes, we even consider it to be contradictory to the national interests of the United States, and even to Israel itself! Taking into account that Israeli society is divided into what we would call the

"peaceniks" and the "Likudniks," or the war camp and the peace camp, or those who believe a Zionist ideology about the divine right given to Israel to expand, to grab more and more land, to build more and more settlements; as opposed to the other camp in Israel, a constituency for peace, in which many Israelis believe that in order for Israel to be accepted by its neighbors, and in order for the grandchildren of the Israelis to live in peace with our grandchildren, they need to understand that they cannot continue their policies of occupation, of oppression, and of humiliation, to the occupied people under their reign.

So we, in Syria, understood that it is of paramount importance to have a good relationship with United States. Because, as you all remember, Syria has a part of its territories occupied, the Golan, and Syria has embraced the pan-Arab peace initiative, based on the fair principle of land-for-peace, we realized in Syria that maintaining a solid, practical working relationship with the United States will help serve our national interests. But also being realistic, we understand that this should also reflect on the national interests of both the United States and its allies.

## **Iraq War: The Tipping Point**

Of course, it is needless to remind everybody that the war on Iraq, the invasion and occupation of Iraq, was the tipping point, after which bilateral relations between Syria and the



State Department/Michael Gross

*Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem (left) met with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt in May 2007, and again in Istanbul in November 2007. Syria insisted that if it is to be a party to peace discussions, Israel's occupation of Syria's Golan Heights must be on the agenda. This was finally agreed to by the U.S., allowing Syrian participation at Annapolis: a step forward.*

United States dramatically deteriorated. It is known to everybody that Syria has opposed this war on Iraq, understanding that it would create many more problems than it will resolve; it will fuel extremes and fundamentalism across our region; and most importantly, it will further destabilize our region, and probably have terrible repercussions on all neighboring countries, not only on Iraq. The issue of the Iraqi refugees in Syria, in Jordan, and elsewhere in the Middle East, is just one small reminder of the so-called “collateral damage” that has befallen other neighboring countries of Iraq, but there are many other issues that the war on Iraq, the occupation of Iraq, has created.

Back to Syrian-U.S. relations: As I have said, once the war on Iraq started, relations between Syria and the United States deteriorated dramatically, and the current, present administration started using terms to describe Syria that it has never used before, such as Syria being a “rogue state,” or Syria becoming the most eligible candidate to join the official list of the “axis of evil.” (We have not joined that yet, but we are always reminded of it.)

Having said this, and despite the difficulties, we in Syria realize that the U.S. presence in Iraq has become a reality. Whether we like it or not, today the United States is the occupying authority in Iraq and it has the upper hand in whatever goes on in Iraq. And because it is in our own national interest to find a solution to the ongoing conflict in Iraq, and to help stabilize the situation in Iraq, we started offering cooperation with the United States as early as 2004. Of course, at that point, the U.S. administration would flatly reject any attempt by the Syrians to help stabilize the situation in Iraq. And whenever they would raise an issue with us, like allegations concerning the infiltration of insurgents from Syria into Iraq,

our response would not only be to refute these accusations or deny them, but to tell the United States, “Look, if you think there is a problem there, let us work together on this problem.”

I remember, that as far back as April 2004, I was instructed by my government to meet with top officials from the Pentagon and tell them, that while you continue repeating those allegations about Syria allowing insurgents to infiltrate those borders, and while we are telling you this is untrue, we don’t want to waste time and energy on this; I am here to officially offer the U.S. administration actual cooperation, actual engagement on securing the Syrian-Iraqi borders. And I remember well, I started by offering the officials from

the Pentagon—two Assistant Secretaries of Defense, at the time—as a starter, joint, trilateral patrols, exchanging information, sharing intelligence, field meetings between officers on both sides of the border. But of course, all our attempts were rejected.

By August 2004, a large U.S. official delegation visited Damascus, and discussed with us the possibility of restarting engagement on Iraq. And because, as I have said, it is in our own national interest to help stabilize the situation in Iraq, we thought, this offers a common ground. And at least apparently, the United States claims to want to stabilize the situation in Iraq, so why not? Why not help the Iraqis? We were not offering actual help to the United States, but help to the Iraqis, because we in Syria believe, that as long as violence continues in Iraq, as long as bloodshed and sectarian strife continue in Iraq, the U.S. administration will have a pretext to remain in Iraq.

And let me be honest and candid with you: It’s of a paramount national interest for Syria, 1) to preserve the territorial integrity of Iraq; 2) to see all foreign armies withdraw from Iraq. Because of our understanding of this situation, we thought that if we can actually help stabilize the situation in Iraq, and put an end to the ongoing situation of bloodshed and violence, on the one hand, we will be doing a great service to our Iraqi sisters and brothers; but on the other hand, we will not give the U.S. administration or any other power, a pretext to continue its military presence in Iraq.

So, as of August 2004, we agreed to resume cooperation with the United States on Iraq. This cooperation lasted for a very short period of time, till January 2005, when Under Secretary of State Richard Armitage visited Damascus and came to us with a list of requests concerning Iraq, and to

prove our goodwill, we fulfilled everything that we had promised Richard Armitage at the time, and I think you can always verify our side of the story, because Richard Armitage is still around. And we thought that that would be a restarting point, in which United States and Syria can re-engage diplomatically.

## The Annapolis Conference

However, this did not happen: As you all know, the whole team changed at the State Department in January 2005, and the new team came in. And for reasons that are not clear to us today, any attempts to engage diplomatically and politically between the United States and Syria stalled completely. And this continued to be the case until seven months ago, when an unprecedented meeting between Secretary Rice and our Foreign Minister took place in Sharm el-Sheikh. In that meeting, Secretary Rice asked our Foreign Minister to resume the past cooperation Syria used to have with the United States on intelligence, military, and security issues. We told the United States at that time that it is impossible for us, in Syria, to re-engage on those issues with the United States, while the United States continues to refuse to talk to us, to engage with us diplomatically and politically. We do not believe that Syria is a charity, in which we would give, give, and give, and take nothing back in return.

That meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh ended with our understanding that the ball is in the American court: If they want us to cooperate with them, on the security, military, and intelligence level, they also have to engage with us diplomatically, and politically. We're not going to do this, while the top U.S. leaders and officials continue to bash and lambaste Syria at every available occasion.

So, nothing happened after Sharm el-Sheikh, till a couple of months ago. Another meeting took place in Istanbul, also between Secretary Rice and our Foreign Minister, Walid al-Moallem. This time Secretary Rice asked Syria to be present, to attend the Annapolis conference. And we told the United States at the meeting in Istanbul, that it will be practically impossible for us to attend Annapolis if we will not be allowed to discuss our occupied Golan. It's preposterous that Syria would go and attend a peace conference, when Syria has a part of its territories occupied by Israel, and sit there, listen to the speeches, applaud the speakers, and not even be allowed to discuss its occupied territories: It doesn't work this way.

Secretary Rice said to her Syrian counterpart, that it would be impossible to include the Golan, because the agenda was already set. And we told her, "Well, if the Golan will not be included, then Syria will not be able to attend."

To make a long story short, lots of discussions and inter-mediations took place, and three days prior to Annapolis, the United States informed Syria that it is pleased to tell us that a special session on the Israel-Syrian track would be included;

of course, a session on the Lebanese-Israeli track also would be included. And thus a comprehensive peace in the Middle East would be discussed during Annapolis, so we decided to join.

In one way or another, we believed that that was a minor, but a positive improvement in U.S.-Syrian relations, and we hope that this will lead to more and more diplomatic and political discussions, and engagement, that might lead to the resumption of the fully fledged sort of cooperation we used to have with the United States on all levels and in all fronts.

Of course, there are many skeptics about Annapolis, and also there are many people who believe that Annapolis was something great, it was good and great it has happened. The skeptics look at the lack of any preparations prior to Annapolis, and consider it as just a forum in which foreign ministers and leaders of states gave public speeches. They consider the whole exercise in Annapolis as a grand photo opportunity. Those who are more on the optimistic side, think that, regardless of everything else, Annapolis did create momentum for the peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians, that desperately needs some sort of new blood, or a push here, or a push there. And it did create a paradigm in which all parties, everybody involved, agreed that there is a need for a comprehensive approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict and to help bring peace to the Middle East.

As far as we are concerned, the Syrians, I would say, here was this international forum, and there was for us an opportunity to come, to participate, and to remind the whole world, that a part of Syria is occupied, also a part of Lebanon is occupied, and there is a need to address all issues, not only the Israeli-Palestinian issue—taking into account, of course, that the Palestinian issue is the core issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict. We are not belittling the Palestinian issue: We still, in Syria, believe that it has precedence over everything else. But having said this, we also need to remind the world that peace cannot be universal, comprehensive, and cannot prevail in the Middle East, as long as the Israeli occupation of the Syrian territories and the Lebanese territories continues. And of course—of course—as long as there is no independent sovereign, viable Palestinian state, then our region will really not enjoy the benefits and fruits of the peace that all parties dream of.

## Future Prospects

I would say, that reading the situation on the ground after Annapolis, is not very encouraging. Israel has resumed its plans to expand its illegal settlements in Har Homa and elsewhere, and the Israeli government is now thinking, thinking of changing the status of the so-called illegal "legal posts" in the occupied Palestinian territories, into what *they* would consider "legal" settlements. And you know, they consider them legal from their viewpoint, regardless of the fact that *all* Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are il-

legal, according to international law, and to what is accepted as legitimate behavior and accepted norms of political behavior by any occupying party in the world

Also, the so-called “targeted assassination” policy continues, in Gaza and elsewhere, in Palestine, occupied territories. Only yesterday, the Israeli forces captured and imprisoned about 32 Palestinians from the West Bank, not from Gaza itself.

So the prospects are not that encouraging, that positive, reading the situation as it is on the ground. However, on the other hand, just to be realistic, we happen to know that meetings are taking place in Paris, and Palestinian and Israeli officials are discussing all issues.

Now, if we come back to the Syrian-U.S. track, let me say the following to you: Today in Syria, we believe that the Syrian-Israeli peace track will not be re-launched as long as there is no U.S. administration that fully and enthusiastically supports peace talks between the Syrians and the Israelis. Now, in the past, let me remind you, that it was Vice President Bush, Sr., who convened the Madrid peace conference, and who actually played an important role in brokering Syrian-Israeli peace talks; and then it was President Clinton, during his eight years of term, that worked so hard with his team, trying to bring the Arabs and the Israelis to a peace agreement, but also, as far as we are concerned, who worked also very hard on the Syrian-Israeli peace track.

Now, the situation with the present administration has changed from its nonchalance, in the beginning, saying that they don’t want to spend any energy, time, or effort on trying to negotiate peace between the Arabs and the Israelis, or to play the role of the broker of peace; but then, they evolved into a position in which the U.S. administration has become ferociously opposed to any peace talks between, at least—let me say this—the Syrians and the Israelis. In many occasions, the United States, whenever it would discuss the possibility of reviving peace talks between Syria and Israel, the U.S. administration would always be adamant about opposing such peace talks.

Now, what we are told, is that the U.S. administration has gone back to a situation, in which, on the one hand, they do not actively support peace talks between the Syrians and the Israelis, but on the other hand, they are not interested in playing any role in trying to bring the Syrians and the Israelis together to the negotiation table. At least, this role—as we are being told by our Russian friends—this role will be attempted by the Russians [inaudible], and the Moscow peace conference they are planning to convene, as a follow-up to the Annapolis peace conference.

We look at this situation today, between Syria and the United States, and we still believe that it is vital for us to re-engage politically and diplomatically with the United States. The difficulties are there, we cannot deny them; but what we believe is, when two countries have difficulties between each other, then they need more than anything else, to sit together,

and to address all the issues. Put all the issues on the table and address all the issues. We will have a common ground, upon which we can build and move forward. Is there a possibility to improve relations with Syria and the present administration in its last year, in its lame-duck year? Yes, there is, both theoretically speaking and potentially, such a possibility. We do not believe that dramatic improvements will take place, but it has already considerably improved in the past six months, relatively speaking, of course. We don’t hear the sort of accusations about Syria we used to hear in the past four years from the Bush Administration. However, we are still regarded as a negative player in the Middle East. And despite that the Europeans and most of the world considers Syria to be part of the solution, not a part of the problem, the U.S. is still hesitant, reluctant, and probably divided within administration itself, about the role it should play towards Syria, and whether they should engage, or otherwise, with Syria.

Only yesterday, I heard an astounding statement by President Bush, when he was meeting with some Jewish leaders, because of Chanukah, and he told them that the Jews have fled Syria because of oppression. This surprised me, and astounded me a lot. And in a way, it is educational. The level of misunderstanding and lack of knowledge they have about Syria: There is a prosperous, thriving Jewish-Syrian community that lives in Brooklyn that enjoys the best possible relations with their motherland, with Syria. They visit there regularly; I attend all their occasions—I am always the guest of honor at every wedding, every bar mitzvah they have, and they have maintained the best possible, warmest relations with Syria. And they *didn’t know*—till yesterday, when President Bush told them—that they were oppressed when they used to live in Syria.

So, in a way this little story reflects a lot about the misunderstanding, and the totally, totally wrong perceptions the Bush Administration has got about my country.

Thank you very much, and I hope we can move to the Q&A session.

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## Discussion

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**Q:** My name is Raphael Cohen-Almagor, I am at the Woodrow Wilson Center. Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador for these words, and I listened to you very carefully.

There are three stumbling blocks between the United States and Syria, that might interfere with the relationship in the creation of good, solid relations that you like to envisage:

One is the issue of the connections between Syria and North Korea. If you can elaborate on this for a while.

Second issue is the relationship between Syria and terrorist organizations. You are hosting the notorious Khaled Mashaal [of Hamas] for some time now. If you can elaborate on this issue?

And then, the third stumbling block is your relationship





White House Photo/Chris Greenberg

*At the Annapolis Conference, Nov. 27, 2007, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas addresses the delegates from nearly 50 nations and organizations. Dr. Moustapha notes that the situation since Annapolis has not been very encouraging, and U.S. officials continue to make provocative statements against Syria; but diplomacy is continuing.*

with Lebanon. How you foresee the future between Syria and Lebanon? What kind of relationship would you like to see between the two countries?

And another issue between Israel and—

**Moustapha:** Well! Very long question. This will take half an hour to address all three issues, okay?

**Moderator:** I ask you to ask short questions, please.

**Moustapha:** First, we were never, ever told—this is a big surprise to me, and it's a good educational experience for me—we were never told that relations between Syria and North Korea are an issue between Syria and the United States. Actually, the United States is diplomatically engaging with North Korea. I think this is very good! This is the sort of advice I would like to give any country in the world: You have a problem with a country, engage with this country, and in a way, I think the relations between the United States and North Korea are maturing up to a certain practical liberty. I hope all the best for both countries, and I hope they will have good relations with each other.

Nobody has ever discussed with us, relations between Syria and North Korea, that are normal relations. Now, if you are referring to the hype in the U.S. media—*U.S. media*, not by even the Israeli government, or the American government—about the *alleged*, alleged Syrian-Korean nuclear link, or cooperation, or program, well, I think nobody is discussing this any more.

I would tell you the following: I can't disclose a lot publicly, but even here in the United States, at a highly classified

hearing that was presented in the U.S. Congress a couple of weeks ago, key officials from the U.S. administration had to say, behind closed doors, that there are no Syrian nuclear projects, no Syrian-Korean nuclear cooperation.

So, this is the sort of silly, absurd, ridiculous hype that reminds us of the sort of stories we used to read when the Iraqi WMDs were discussed prior to the war on Iraq, or even the more absurd stories about the links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda! It's so easy to fabricate stories, if you are ideologically motivated, and if you have a gullible audience that does not critically read and analyze the sort of information they are being fed or told.

Now, as far as Khaled Mashaal living in Syria: Let me remind you, that Khaled Mashaal is a Palestinian who used to live in his own homeland, Palestine. Then the Is-

raelis kicked him out, to Jordan. And then, the Jordanians made a deal with the Israelis—I'm not going to deal with [that]—and today he lives in Syria. He's a human being, he's a Palestinian person. Not only him: Half a million Palestinians living today in Syria. We did not invite them to come to Syria; they were expelled, they were kicked out from their homeland. If Israel would allow the half a million Palestinians from Syria, half a million Palestinians from Lebanon, I don't know how many other millions of Palestinians, to go back to their occupied territory, we have no problem.

But, the other alternative is, to throw, with due respect, Khaled Mashaal in the sea? What is this! And people sit here and say, "Why do you host Khaled Mashaal...?" We did not invite him to come to Syria.

When the Israelis realize that they cannot continue to occupy the Palestinian territories, and to humiliate them and to push the Palestinians into conditions of despair and suffering, then I don't think that the Palestinians will remain in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and elsewhere. They will go back to their territories. And when the Israeli state realizes that the Palestinians are also human beings, equal to the Jews of the world, and they have a right to return to their homes and villages, then the whole issue will be resolved—and nobody will be discussing Khaled Mashaal with Syria any more.

However, if you know of a better solution, to allow Khaled Mashaal and the half-million Palestinians, refugees who live today in Syria, to go back to their occupied territories, then we will be very glad to address this issue.

## The Lebanon Crisis

Moving to Lebanon: Syria recognizes Lebanon as a sovereign, independent state. When we entered Lebanon, we entered Lebanon to end the civil war there, invited by the Lebanese government. Our military presence was endorsed by the Arab League, by the European Union, by the former Soviet Union, and most importantly, by the government of the United States of America—that never, *ever* described our presence in Lebanon as an “occupation,” till after the fall-out between Syria and the United States, because of Iraq!

Suddenly, within a very short period of time, the U.S. officials started to describe our so-called “presence” in Lebanon, as an evil occupation of Lebanon. Very good! The United Nations Security Council passed the resolution demanding that Syria, all foreign troops, withdraw from Lebanon. We withdrew from Lebanon.

I hope that this will give a good example to the other people who occupy other territories. Like, can you imagine the Palestinians demonstrating in the streets of Jerusalem, demanding that the Israelis withdraw, and within a couple of months, the Israeli troops say, “Okay, our presence has become controversial in the Palestinian territories. Let us withdraw”?

The fact that anyone, anyone can compare our presence in Lebanon to the U.S. occupation of Iraq, or the Israeli occupation of the Arab territories, is not even being realistic.

We were in Lebanon. Our presence was endorsed, as I have said, by world powers, by the official government of Lebanon. And a United Nations resolution passed, demanding that we withdraw from Lebanon—we withdrew from Lebanon. End of the story!

If you are asking about the terrible, horrible crime, the assassination of Rafik el-Hariri, fair enough: There is an ongoing investigation about this assassination of Rafik el-Hariri. The United Nations is investigating this assassination. It is considered to be the largest investigation team in the history of mankind: Forensic scientists, criminal investigators, policemen, Interpol experts, you name them, they are there, working hard to reveal the truth about this terrible crime. As far as we are concerned, Serge Brammertz, the lead investigator from the United Nations, has submitted at least four reports to the United Nations Security Council. Those reports are available online; please go and Google them. In *each* report, he praises the Syrian cooperation with his investigation.

From our viewpoint, we are committed to help reveal the truth about this crime, and it helps Syrian national interest, to actually reveal the truth about this terrible crime, so that nobody will point fingers in a baseless way, and accuse this party or that party for politically motivated reasons....

## The Israel-Syria Track

**Q:** Michele Steinberg from *Executive Intelligence Review*. Mr. Ambassador, I read, as part of my job, almost every day, all of the English-language Israeli press, and there

are often quotes, including from the President, Shimon Peres, saying, “We must make peace with Syria at some point.” I’d like you to elaborate, if you can, how that is reflected in back channels, [or] directly, and elaborate what you said about Russia playing a role in pursuing the Israel-Syria track.

**Moustapha:** Thank you for reminding me and the audience, that actually the Israeli leaders, themselves, say what I have just been saying: “It is inevitable, at one point we will make peace with Syria; at one point, we will allow the Palestinians to have their independent state.” When this will evolve and when it will happen, I’m afraid to tell you; this has become a hostage of *purely* internal, domestic Israeli policies. It’s the inside political fights, and occurring inside Israel itself, that have taken the more important issue of peace between Israel and the Arabs as a hostage.

Now, about back channels, there are no very important back channels. There are just countries and individuals, who discuss the possibilities of restarting peace talks between Syria and Israel: They discuss this with us, they discuss this with the Israelis—they try to come to understanding, they are hopeful.

As far as we are concerned, we in Syria oppose secret talks between Syria and Israel. What we want, is to talk under the Sun. We have a very clear position in Syria: The moment Israel is willing to start peace talks with Syria, we are willing to start peace talks with Israel—but not in a secretive way. We think that there is nothing secretive about peace talks between Syria and Israel. The Syrian position is a very clear one, so why should we go into secret channels to discuss peace between us and the Israelis?

Of course, I’m not telling you, that we should negotiate in front of the TV cameras! I’m telling you that the event itself, the peace process itself, should be a public event, but the negotiations should take place behind closed doors, naturally—I’m not implying otherwise.

So, many back channels come to us, and explore with us the possibility of conducting some sort of track to diplomacy, or secret peace talks between Syria and Israel. We always tell them, “We don’t believe in Track 2 diplomacy, we believe in Track 1 diplomacy. This is our policy! We want to make peace. You want to make peace—sit with us! You don’t want to make peace, everything else is a pretext. Everything else!” Whatever you hear about “why we don’t want to sit with the Syrians,” is a pretext, because they know that once peace is achieved, and all those issues will go into their right place, and will fit into the larger framework.

Please do remember, that Nelson Mandela used to be described as a terrorist, when he was imprisoned by the South African apartheid regime. For years and years, he was described as a terrorist. So, using negative terms, accusations, leads to nowhere. It’s whether it’s about the desire, and how serious you are about whether you want to address the issues or not.