

Are Israel and Syria Holding Peace Talks?

by Dean Andromidas

Are Israel and Syria holding back-channel peace talks? As far-fetched as this may sound, this is the real question to be asked today in the Middle East. On Sept. 18, and again on Sept. 26, Lyndon LaRouche issued a statement supporting Israeli President Shimon Peres's call for Israel to hold peace talks with Syria, as key to begin transforming the disastrous situation throughout Southwest Asia (See "LaRouche Backs Peres on Peace Talks With Syria," *EIR*, Oct. 5). Since those calls, diplomatic developments and statements by Syrian and Israeli officials indicate that something is happening behind the scenes between the two countries.

These developments follow ongoing moves by Vice President Dick Cheney to start another war in the region against Iran, Syria, or both. Cheney and his neoconservative cronies have made it clear to Israel that they will not tolerate an Israeli-Syrian peace process. They have seized on the mysterious Sept. 6 air strike by Israel against an unknown target in Syria, to claim that Syria has an undeclared nuclear program, a charge calculated to set up Syria for further attacks by Israel or the United States.

To counter Cheney's moves, it appears that both Israel and Syria have recruited Turkey to mediate talks between them.

On Oct. 11, in an interview with the Tunisian daily *Al Shuruq*, Syrian President Bashar Assad revealed that Turkish officials have been making frequent visits to Damascus in ongoing efforts to prepare the ground for Israel-Syria talks. Although he said that Syria is unlikely to attend the Bush Administration's peace conference in November, because its details remain vague, Assad reiterated his position that Syria expects negotiations to be held under U.S. auspices and participation, and that the Golan Heights would be restored to Syria.

"In order for the Turkish mediation to succeed," Assad told the daily, it requires "a godfather who has weight in the international arena, and which can only be, if you like it or not, the United States. But until that negotiation is possible, a Turkish mediation can play a positive role. That is what Turkey is trying to do." As for Israel, Assad said, "All we want is a clear declaration by Israeli officials of their desire for peace and the return of [occupied] land to Syria."

The next day, at least one Israeli official made a statement in the spirit of Assad's request: Outgoing Israeli Army Deputy Chief of Staff, Gen. Moshe Kaplinsky, in an interview that appeared on Israel's Channel 10 television station, called for Israel to hold a dialogue with Syria as a crucial means of lower-

ing tensions between the two countries. He said, in part, “I think it is of great interest to the state of Israel and the West as a whole, to take Syria out of this axis [with Iran], and according to my understanding, this is possible. If the conditions are created, it can be done.”

This was not just a coincidence. On Oct. 5, Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan was in Damascus, where he met President Assad, after which he visited Israel, where he told Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Israeli President Shimon Peres that Syria was ready for peace talks. After meeting Israeli President Peres, Babacan said, “I encouraged the [Syrian] leaders to take part in Bush’s international conference, and they told me clearly that Syria was interested in the Israeli-Syrian issue also being on the negotiating table.”

Baracan also demanded from Israel details on its mysterious Sept. 6 air strike on Syria; Turkey had discovered on its territory Israeli fuel tanks that had obviously been dropped by the Israeli attack aircraft. “The area is currently in a very dangerous and delicate state. We are calling on all sides to reach a solution [to their grievances] through dialogue and other peaceful means,” Baracan said. “Turkey will not let Turkish territory or airspace be used in any activity that could harm the security or safety of Syria.”

In his meeting with Olmert, Babacan made a similar statement: “Syria is ready for dialogue and should not be isolated. There must be a way to negotiate with them. The only reason why Syria is allied with Iran is the international boycott that has been imposed on it,” Babacan said.

To Save Peace Summit, Rice Needs Assad

Although neither Peres nor Olmert responded positively, at least not in public, there is a strong peace lobby in the highest levels of the Israeli Defense Force. An Oct. 16 commentary by Amir Oren, security correspondent for the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz*, alludes directly to such military support. He tells U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that if she hopes to have any success in the November peace conference, “especially productive can be the inclusion of Syria in the conference.” Oren writes, “President Bashar Assad’s announcement that he will not come to the conference if there is no discussion on the Golan Heights caused Jerusalem to sigh in relief, instead of sounding positive with a call to restore at Annapolis negotiations with Syria.”

Pointing to the fact that there is support in the Israeli military for this, Oren says, “Real leadership aspiring to achieve peace would have jumped at the opportunity and would have used the support of the chief of staff and his advisors, the military intelligence chief, and other senior defense officers.” Even in the wake of the Sept. 6 Israeli air strike in Syria, negotiations could easily be resumed, Oren says. His commentary concludes, “To save Annapolis, Condoleezza Rice needs Assad.”

Several of the most senior officers in the Israeli Defense

Force, including Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, were involved in the Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations in 1999, when Ehud Barak was Prime Minister. An Israeli intelligence source told *EIR* that there is strong military support for Israeli-Syrian peace talks today, stronger even than in political circles.

On the same day that the Oren article appeared in *Ha’aretz*, President Assad told the Syrian State News Service (SANA), on the eve of his official visit to Turkey: “We have told them [the Turks] that our stance toward peace does not change. All we want is a clear declaration by Israeli officials of their desire for peace and the return of [occupied] land to Syria.”

Cheney Maneuvers for War

Cheney is far from abandoning his designs for a broader war in the region. He and his cronies seized upon the Sept. 6 Israeli air strike against a still-unknown target in Syria, to beat the wardrums against Syria and North Korea for allegedly cooperating on an illegal nuclear program. Yet, Israel has kept total silence about the strike, admitting only that a strike occurred, but releasing no other information. Assad said only that the Israelis struck an unused military base and then beat a hasty retreat.

Cheney’s top neocon ally, former United Nations Amb. John Bolton, from his bunker at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, talked to anyone who would listen, about an alleged Syria-North Korea bomb plot. The story escalated just as North Korea agreed to give up its nuclear program, and after it had signed an historic agreement with South Korea for broad economic and political cooperation—a development that neither Cheney nor Bolton wanted.

The campaign peaked with an article in the Oct. 14 *New York Times*, which quoted unnamed sources and unsubstantiated allegations, on the role of Dick Cheney himself, leading a “debate” within the White House for the United States to support an Israeli strike against Syria.

The real character of this “exposé” was revealed by Prof. Joseph Palermo of California State University, Sacramento, who wrote in the online Huffington Post on Oct. 16, that the authors of the *Times* article, David Sanger and Mark Mazzetti, had cited 23 sources, 22 of whom were “unnamed” officials of the U.S. government. The 23rd source was White House spokeswoman Dana Perino.

Palermo, who has been writing about Cheney’s disinformation tactics for years, says that the leaks to the *Times* were designed to make the case for an Israeli preemptive strike on Syria, which would also help Cheney’s plans for a U.S. preemptive strike against Iran. Palermo called Sanger and Mazzetti the new “Judy Miller-Michael Gordon” team, doing the same Administration dirty work as Miller and Gordon had done earlier against Iraq and Iran, respectively.

On Oct. 15, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) called Cheney’s bluff by pointing out that any country

that has such evidence has an obligation to present it to the Agency. "The IAEA has no information about any undeclared nuclear facility in Syria and no information about recent reports. We would obviously investigate any relevant information coming our way. The IAEA secretariat expects any country having information about nuclear-related activities in another country to provide that information to the IAEA."

The IAEA is still waiting for that information.

Cheney is also moving to undermine Rice's feeble attempt to convene the Middle East peace conference in Annapolis, Maryland, provisionally set for some time in November. No sooner did Rice complete a tour of the region, where she met Olmert, Palestinian President Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas), Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and Jordanian King Abdullah III, than the White House announced that National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, and his deputy for the Middle East, Elliott Abrams, will soon travel to Israel and the Palestinian National Authority. Abrams is Cheney's number-one ally, and represents Cheney's hardline position on the National Security Council and the White House staff. His arrival will signal to the region an attempt to undo everything Rice tried to do.

This fact will not go unnoticed in Israel, where, even before the White House announcement, Akiva Eldar wrote in a commentary in *Ha'aretz* Oct. 16: "Elliott Abrams, who is in charge of the National Security Council's Middle Eastern Affairs, holds that negotiations with the Palestinians on a final status solution is an idiotic idea. Members of the other camp, headed by Rice, believe the time has come to renew the peace process, but they have no idea how to go about this..."

Given the role of Cheney, both the Israeli and Palestinian peace camps see the proposed conference as a disaster waiting to happen. Yossi Beilin, chairman of the Israeli Meretz-Yahad party, was in Washington to hold meetings with U.S. Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nick Burns and Deputy National Security Advisor Jim Jeffrey. Ynet quoted Beilin as saying that the Americans were "creating a situation wherein failure in Annapolis may lead to disaster. It would have been possible for bilateral talks between Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to continue. If, after seven years of no negotiations at all, this summit fails, it could truly bring about catastrophe." Failure, Beilin told Ynet, would also spell the end of Abbas's rule and "give an unbelievable boost to Hamas's strength."

The only way to save the conference, Beilin told Ynet, was for both sides to achieve something significant. "My message is that we did not ask for the Annapolis conference, but if you wanted it, then it is your [America's] responsibility. It is up to you, along with Israel and the Palestinians of course, to prevent Annapolis from becoming" a disaster.

In his Sept. 26 call for Syria-Israel peace talks, LaRouche said that unlike Rice's proposed conference, which nobody wants anyway, a Syria-Israel deal would "open up the door for other things" that would break this "damned stalemate," and open the way for a partnership between Israel, Syria, and other countries in the region for a "war-proof design for nuclear desalination" that will make possible a regional economic peace-through-development program.

If Israel is not involved in back-channel talks, it certainly should be.

Former Mossad Chief: Iran Not an Existential Threat

While George W. Bush is raving that a nuclear Iran is a threat to the existence of Israel and could lead to World War III, former chief of the Israeli Mossad intelligence agency, Ephraim Halevy, declared the very opposite.

Speaking at a Lauder Institute conference in Jerusalem on Oct. 17, Halevy said: "All the problems Israel had were not the result of unidentified threats. Iran must be dealt with in two simultaneous ways: They must be pressured through the global economy, and they must be given an opportunity to talk once they change their ways."

Declaring that Iran cannot destroy Israel, Halevy stated: "We cannot say that the Iranian threat is an existential threat on the State of Israel. I believe that the State of Israel cannot

be eliminated. It cannot be destroyed because of things you know and because of things you can imagine." The latter is an obvious reference to the fact that it is Israel that has nuclear weapons, and could pose an existential threat to Iran if Iran were to try to attack Israel.

As for Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Halevy said sarcastically: "Had he not existed, we would have had to create him. He is doing great things for us."

Addressing Israel's activity in the face of the Iranian nuclear program, Halevy stated: "You should assume that things have been done and things are being done, and assume that the Jewish mind can create amazing things. Iran is a bitter enemy, but this does not mean that it should be an enemy forever. The situation in Iran has not been particularly good over the past year. The economic situation is worsening, there is a 30% inflation, an official unemployment of 25%, and in Tehran, the unemployment rate is 50%. Those who elected Ahmadinejad President did not elect him to develop nuclear weapons, but rather to serve as a successful mayor in Tehran."