

An Opportunity Not To Be Missed

The Bush Administration almost got it right this past week. Through a strange combination of efforts, a top-level delegation of Syrian scholars, economists, and journalists was scheduled to visit Washington, and to meet with David Welch, the top U.S. State Department official for the Middle East. The Syrian delegation was to have included Riad Daoudi, the Syrian government advisor handling the indirect negotiations with Israel, which are being mediated by the Turkish government.

At the last moment, Welch cancelled the meeting, and Daoudi cancelled his participation in the delegation. The three other scheduled Syrian visitors did come to Washington, and held a series of fruitful meetings on Capitol Hill and at several think tanks. The delegation is now touring the country, having delivered a clear message: Syria is ready to strike a peace deal with Israel, and the only significant missing element is a U.S. presence at the table.

Senior U.S. diplomats and intelligence officials have been saying for months that a peace treaty between Syria and Israel is doable, and could even be finalized this year. With the Palestinian situation highly in flux, and with Israeli intransigence, measured in the volume of new settlement construction, still a key “fact on the ground,” the notion that Condoleezza Rice is going to successfully navigate a final status agreement between Tel Aviv and Ramallah between now and the end of the year, is a stretch.

Why then, not follow Lyndon LaRouche’s sage advice, from September 2007, and move ahead with a Syria-Israel peace accord, a breakthrough that would fundamentally alter the dynamics in the region, and greatly reduce the still significant threat of war before the end of the year? A senior U.S. intelligence official, with access to the Bush-Cheney White House, has warned for more than a year that, unless there is some Mideast peace breakthrough—and soon—the likelihood of a U.S. and/or Israeli military strike against Iran is very high, before Bush and Cheney pack their bags and vacate 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

In a series of public statements in the second half of

2007, both prior to and following the Annapolis Middle East peace conference, LaRouche pushed the Israel-Syria deal. Clearly the logic of such a peace agreement, ending hostilities between Israel and the last Arab state to have actually participated in the wars against Israel, is compelling. To its credit, the Turkish government has taken a point role in promoting mediated talks between Israel and Syria. Three negotiating sessions have taken place in Turkey, and a fourth is scheduled for the very end of July. “Ninety-eight percent of the issues on the table have been resolved,” according to a number of sources close to the talks.

Why, then, did the Bush Administration back off from taking a direct hand in the negotiations, when the opportunity was on the table? Put simply, the Administration is stuck in the past seven-and-a-half years of disastrous foreign policy blunders, what former Ambassador Chas Freeman has called “diplomacy-free foreign policy.”

With Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in deep political trouble at home, this last, best opportunity must not be squandered. Olmert is anxious to strike a peace deal with Syria; it might save his prime ministership. The Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces, Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, a very professional soldier who shuns the war party in Israel, was in Washington at the same time as the Syrian delegation. Israeli has made it clear, through its numerous back channels in the U.S. capital, that a majority within the Israeli institutions is ready for a Syrian deal, but the U.S. must be on board. Syria has delivered the same message through its highly capable ambassador in Washington, Dr. Imad Moustapha.

So let us break the Washington deadlock. Let Israel and Syria reach a final agreement—through the Turkish channel or other means. Then deliver the message to Washington: Everyone is on board, provided that the United States join the arrangement. American security guarantees, perhaps the deployment of a Sinai-style peacekeeping batallion to the Golan Heights, will be required. Under those circumstances, even the Bush Administration would have a hard time saying “No.”