



DIALOGUE SESSION TWO

The Prospects for Israeli-Syrian Peace

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The Saban Forum’s session on Syria focused on assessing the possibility of an Israeli-Syrian peace deal, and whether the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, would be willing to meet Israel’s core requirements. There was some disagreement over the intentions of Assad, and whether he has shown himself to be a moderate, cautious leader, or a gambler bent on supporting extremist groups.

An American participant began by laying out the current state of affairs. Syria’s demands are tactical—namely, Israel’s withdrawal from the Golan Heights—whereas Israel’s demands are strategic—namely, Syria breaking away from Iran and providing security and political guarantees. The main question is whether Syria can fulfill these requirements. One perspective is that because Syria’s relationship with Iran and terrorist groups, like Hizballah, is tactical it can be changed. The counter-view is that Syria is locked into these relationships and is more desirous of overtaking Lebanon than of making peace with Israel.

An Israeli participant said that one factor holding up the talks with Syria is that Damascus is looking for assurances before the start of negotiations that any deal would entail Israel’s full withdrawal from the Golan Heights—i.e., guaranteeing the “Rabin Deposit.” At the same time, Israel has refused to guarantee the Rabin Deposit and is instead seeking negotiations without preconditions. The participant said that for Syria, it is better to have no talks than talks that do not guarantee upfront Israel’s full withdrawal from the Golan Heights. A key reason for this is that Syria sees the very act of direct talks with Israel as a concession.

With this in mind, participants discussed the likelihood of reaching a deal with Syria. An Israeli said the Syria track is controversial but not complicated—the answers are known and can be addressed if there is political will. However, another Israeli noted that Israel must have some self-awareness and realize that its own demands—now heavily dependent on Syria’s relationship with Iran—have changed substantially over the past



several years. Therefore, the framework that existed during the Clinton administration is no longer applicable, and the discussions may be more complex than people believe. Another Israeli participant made the point that negotiations will continue to be difficult because both sides do not know the position of the United States, and U.S. guarantees and incentives are of critical importance, particularly to Syria.

One American asked if a deal is reached, how would Syria's strategic realignment be verified or measured? Because it is difficult to track components of strategic realignment, such as intelligence sharing and cash flows, the American asked how Israel or the United States would actually know when Syria had realigned itself, and noted the possibility that Syria would play both sides, continuing its relationship with Iran but assuring Israel it had severed ties.

American and Israeli participants struggled to answer how likely it would be for Syria to actually break from Iran. To answer this, an Israeli suggested, one needs to know where Iran will be in the near future. If Iran's strength rises, Syria would likely be unwilling to cede its relationship. Therefore, as long as Iran's future remains uncertain, Syria will not commit itself one way or the other. Because of this uncertainty, the Israeli recommended that Israel seek a partial agreement with Syria on certain issues, rather than a comprehensive, final agreement.

The discussion then moved to analyzing the Syrian president. An Israeli argued that Assad has proven himself a leader; the regime is stable and Assad has managed to maneuver among competing powers within the country. In addition, the Israeli claimed, Assad has shown he is capable of making difficult decisions. For example, in 2003 he faced pressure to back the United States in its invasion of Iraq. Assad resisted, and from his perspective, made the right decision—the war imposed a heavy political cost for those involved. All in all, Assad's decision-making and maneuvering have led to the beneficial position that Syria has turned into the object of attention of the West and Iran.

However, there was substantial disagreement on how to classify Assad as a leader, and whether he is serious about forging a deal with Israel. An Israeli argued that Assad's history of decision-making has not made it easy to discern Syria's intentions. Assad had long sought relations with the European Union but ultimately rejected closer ties with Europe because he did not want to address demands relating to human rights and economic liberalization. Another Israeli argued that unlike his



father, he has built ties with Hizballah and has allowed Iran to permeate the region. An American supported this point by highlighting Syria's attempt at building a nuclear reactor, saying that Assad had hubris and was not as cautious as some had suggested. But an Israeli participant disagreed, saying Assad is looking to be like his father—albeit more Western and modern—and is serious about trying to reach an agreement with Israel.

The end of the session saw disagreement between two Israelis on whether a peace deal is worthwhile for Israel. One Israeli questioned the common assumptions many make, arguing that a peace treaty with Syria would not prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities and would not make peace between Israel and Lebanon more likely. The Israeli questioned whether any government agency had conducted a study to determine the security implications of an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, and warned that the security setbacks of a withdrawal would likely outweigh the benefits. The other Israeli disagreed, saying that while Israel needs to approach a deal with Syria with realistic, not romantic, expectations, Israel needs to at least see if a deal is possible. The participant said that seeking progress on the Syrian track is important because it is unlikely that an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal will be reached in the near future.