

Damascus in No Rush for Peace

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In keeping the talks process with Israel alive, Syria is more interested in showing the world how serious it is about peace than in actually securing a final settlement, local analysts say.

Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, who has said little about the indirect peace talks which began in May, stated publicly last week that he wanted direct negotiations with Israel.

His comments came as the talks process appeared to be stalling following the resignation of Israel's chief negotiator and the impending departure of Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert, who played a central part in making the negotiations happen but is expected to resign later this month.

Syrian analysts argue that Damascus is pressing for peace talks because it is keen to show the international community its intentions are serious, even if it is not prepared for a final agreement at this point.

"The process itself began in a moment of crisis for both Syria and Israel," said a Damascus-based political analyst, who did not want to be named. "While Syria wanted a reason to break its international isolation, Olmert wanted to divert attention from his corruption scandal and the disastrous results of the war [against the Lebanese militia Hezbollah] in July 2006."

The analyst suggested that Syria was already on its way to achieving its principal goal since the peace process had helped it begin to break out of international isolation.

He predicted that in any final settlement, Israel would probably demand that Damascus adopt a different relationship with Iran and stop supporting armed groups like Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas.

"Right now, Syria won't sacrifice all the cards it is holding," he continued, adding that its "regional and international vision is still unclear, especially without knowing what the next American administration will be and what its strategy towards the region will be".

Assad acknowledged last week that Syria is waiting for the Israeli election to be over before it decides how negotiations should proceed. And while Damascus has pushed for other nations such as France and Russia to get involved in negotiations, it has recognised that Washington will need to be involved in any final agreement.

The Bush administration, which regards Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism, has refused to be involved in the peace process.

"Regardless of who Olmert's successor is, a supportive American role is very important," said the analyst. "Olmert or anyone else in Israel would not anger the US by reaching an agreement that is not supported by America. Syria is well aware of that."

He said that from Damascus's perspective, if the US began to be supportive of the peace process, it would mark a shift in its policy on Syria – and “that is more important to Syria than the peace process”.

Analysts said that because Syria will not rush into negotiations without Washington, any serious talks can only take place next year.

At this point, Syria is keen to show a future US administration that it is serious about peace, even if it is uncertain what outcome it is ultimately seeking.

"The Syrian position is not clear with regard to whether it really wants a comprehensive peace to get back the occupied Golan and accommodate Israeli demands, or whether it wants to continue the state of 'no war, no peace'," said Radwan Ziadeh, a Syrian scholar at the Washington-based United States Institute of Peace.

"Syria's main ambition is to convince the US to support indirect negotiations with Israel," said Ziadeh. "It knows that the current administration won't play this role because of its negative positions toward Syria ... so Syria is looking to the next administration, hoping it will have a different position and will support the negotiations".

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists.)

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