

## Extra Feature Story

### Israel-Syria Engage in New Peace Negotiations

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**Israel and Syria confirmed last week that they are discussing conditions for peace between the two countries for the first time since similar negotiations broke down eight years ago.**

The process of the indirect talks, which were mediated by officials from Turkey, started in February 2007, but were not made public until now. Major points of conflict are the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights area, and Syria's relationship with Iran and terrorist-linked groups.

#### **The Six Day War**

Israel captured Golan Heights, a plateau overlooking the Syrian capital Damascus on one side and the Sea of Galilee on the other, from neighboring Syria during the Six Day War in 1967.

The war began when Israel, fearing an imminent Arab invasion, launched a preemptive attack on Egypt.

Israel seized Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the West Bank of the Jordan River and East Jerusalem from Jordan.

The war was considered a monumental victory for Israel, but created even deeper rifts with its neighbors.

Over time, Israel has given back some of the land and come to agreements over other regions in an attempt to diffuse conflict with Egypt, Jordan and Palestinian leaders.

#### **Golan Heights**

The latest peace talks center on Syria's demand that Israel return the Golan Heights, reported the Washington Post.

But public opinion polls show that Israelis are opposed to such a move. Golan is now home to some 20,000 Jewish settlers.

Voice of America reported that 70 percent of Israelis oppose withdrawing from the Golan Heights as part of a peace agreement, with only 22 percent in favor.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said Monday that Israel has made no commitment to pull out yet, despite a statement by Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Mualem that Israel had already agreed to return the territory.

## **Other conditions for peace**

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni said last week that "Israel wants to live in peace with its neighbors but Syria also needs to understand that it needs also full renunciation of supporting terror -- Hezbollah, Hamas and of course Iran."

Hezbollah, meaning the Party of God, is a political and military organization in Lebanon mainly made up of Shia Muslims. It is extremely hostile to Israel, and the United States calls Hezbollah a terrorist organization.

In the summer of 2006, members of Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers and killed several others, sparking a month-long war with Israel.

Hamas is the largest Islamist movement in the Palestinian territories. It is also considered a terrorist organization by the United States, and has a militant wing that carries out attacks on Israel.

## **Syria's relations with Iran, U.S.**

Syria and Iran have had an alliance for three decades and in 2006, they signed an agreement on military cooperation.

The alliance was formed in 1980 when Syria sided with Iran in its 8-year war with neighboring Iraq -- an unpopular war among most Middle Eastern countries.

However, the two nations have had their disagreements, including Iran's recent claim that it would investigate the assassination of a top Hezbollah commander who was killed in Damascus.

Syria has had a strained relationship with the Bush administration. The Israel-Syria talks go against the U.S. policy of limited communication with Syria.

"We hope that this is a forum to address various concerns we all have with Syria's support of terrorism, repression of its own people, and so we will see how this progresses," said White House spokeswoman Dana Perino in response to news of the talks.

But, said Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, in a press conference, "The development on the Syrian-Israeli front, while flying in the face of Bush policy, might actually end up bringing Syria further away from Iran and closer to U.S. allies in the region and be a U.S. gain in the long term."

**-- Compiled by Talea Miller for NewsHour Extra**

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