

What if Israel and Syria Find Common Ground?

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ISRAEL'S newspapers are rife with reports of a peace agreement secretly forged between Israeli and Syrian negotiators. Though both the Syrian and Israeli governments have denied any involvement in the talks, past experience shows that such disavowals are often the first indication of truth behind the rumors.

Certainly, there is nothing new about the details of the purported plan, which involves a staged Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, occupied since 1967, and the full normalization of relations between Damascus and Jerusalem. Nor is there a precedent in the willingness of Israeli and Arab leaders to enter into direct discussions without the participation or knowledge of the United States.

What is new is the Bush administration's apparent opposition to a Syrian-Israeli accord and the possibility that Israel, by seeking peace with one of its Arab neighbors, risks precipitating a crisis with the United States.

On more than one occasion, Israeli and Arab leaders have engaged in clandestine talks without informing the White House. In 1977, the envoys of Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt quietly met and laid the groundwork for Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem and for the advent of the Egyptian-Israeli peace process. Only later, when negotiations snagged, did the parties turn to the United States and request presidential mediation.

In 1993, Israeli and Palestinian interlocutors, convening in Oslo, worked out the details of a peace arrangement and requested President Bill Clinton's imprimatur on the accord only days before its signing. Jordan and Israel also asked Mr. Clinton to sponsor their peace treaty, initialed the following year, after they had independently agreed on its terms.

And in 2005, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel unilaterally ordered the evacuation of the Gaza Strip, a move widely welcomed as a stepping stone toward peace but from which the Bush administration, committed to the multilateral process stipulated by the "road map," kept its distance. Syria and Israel have also exchanged peace proposals in the past, sometimes under American auspices, as in the 1991 conference in Madrid.

Yet even when the two sides negotiated bilaterally, as during the secret exchanges between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Hafez al-Assad of Syria in the late 1990s, Washington approved of the contacts. American leaders agreed that the Syrian-Israeli track offered a promising alternative to the perennially stalled Israeli-Palestinian talks, and that achieving peace between the Syrian and Israeli enemies would open the door to regional reconciliation.

All that was before Sept. 11, however, and Syria's inclusion, alongside Iran and North Korea, in President Bush's "axis of evil." Once regarded as a possible partner in a Middle East peace process, the Baathist regime of Bashar al-Assad was suddenly viewed as a source of Middle East instability, a state sponsor of terrorist groups and an implacable foe of the United States.

Hostility toward Damascus intensified after the incursion into Iraq, during which administration officials accused the Syrians of abetting the insurgency and concealing unconventional weapons in Iraq. More recently, the United States has accused Mr. Assad of plotting to undermine Lebanon's efforts to achieve independence from Syria, of assassinating anti-Syrian Lebanese and of acting as an Iranian agent in the Western Arab world.

The last thing Washington wants is a Syrian-Israeli treaty that would transform Mr. Assad from pariah

to peacemaker and lend him greater latitude in promoting terrorism and quashing Lebanon's freedom. Some Israeli officials, by contrast, see substantive benefits in ending their nation's 60-year conflict with Syria. An accord would invariably provide for the cessation of Syrian aid to Hamas and Hezbollah, which endanger Israel's northern and southern sectors.

More crucial still, by detaching Syria from Iran's orbit, Israel will be able to address the Iranian nuclear threat — perhaps by military means — without fear of retribution from Syrian ground forces and missiles. Forfeiting the Golan Heights, for these Israelis, seems to be a sufferable price to pay to avoid conventional and ballistic attacks across most of Israel's borders.

The potentially disparate positions of Israel and the United States on the question of peace with Syria could trigger a significant crisis between the two countries — the first of Mr. Bush's expressly pro-Israel presidency. And yet, facing opposition from a peace-minded Democratic Congress and from members of his own party who have advocated a more robust American role in Middle East mediation, Mr. Bush would have difficulty in withholding approval from a comprehensive Syrian-Israeli agreement.

Mr. Bush may not have to make that decision for some time, if ever. For all his talk of good will, Mr. Assad has made no Sadat-like gestures to Israel, and many Israelis agree with Mr. Bush that Syria should not be rewarded for its assistance to terrorism and its denial of Lebanese liberty.

But if trust is established on both sides and the conditions are conducive to peace, a settlement between Syria and Israel may yet be attained — and a clash between Israel and Washington ignited.

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