

update: Syria and Israel announce indirect talks – 21 May

Key points:

- **Israel and Syria officially announce that indirect peace talks are going ahead under Turkish mediation**
 - **Rival Lebanese factions reach agreement to end violence and political deadlock in a deal which meets most of Hezbollah's key demands**
 - **Egypt continues its efforts to mediate a ceasefire deal between Hamas and Israel**
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Syria

Latest developments

- The Israeli Prime Minister's Office released an official statement today (21 May) saying that Israel and Syria have begun indirect peace talks which are taking place under Turkish mediation.
- The statement said Syria and Israel have agreed to carry out the dialogue in a "serious and continuous manner" with the aim of reaching a "comprehensive peace".
- Turkey issued its own confirmation and said that the talks were likely to continue in rounds lasting several days, once or twice a month.
- The indirect talks began in February 2007 when Olmert visited Turkey. During a private conversation, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan agreed that Turkey would begin mediating between Israel and Syria with the goal of beginning peace negotiations.

Background

- The announcement comes after months of unconfirmed reports of unofficial messages going back and forth from Jerusalem to Damascus through Turkey. Already in July 2007 President Assad announced to the Syrian parliament that he was willing to engage in talks with Israel. Olmert responded to the statement confirming that third parties had been used as mediators between Israel and Syria in recent months.
- One of the issues currently under discussion is whether a Syrian announcement of ending support for terrorism needs to precede an Israeli guarantee that it will withdraw from the Golan Heights in exchange for peace.
- The last peace talks between Israel and Syria were held in the United States in 2000 but they collapsed after the two sides failed to reach an agreement on the fate of the Golan Heights. A dispute over control of the shore of the Sea of Galilee, which the Golan Heights overlook, was widely seen as the main stumbling block.
- The international community has been urging Syria to do more to end its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon. Syria is also currently resisting international pressure on it to comply with the terms of an investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese President Rafik Hariri, in which Syria is accused of being involved. These issues are also expected to form part of the

negotiations between Israel and Syria which would seek to make Syria a more moderate force in the region.

- In an interview during the Annapolis Conference in November 2007, Foreign Secretary David Miliband acknowledged Syria's role in the broader regional peace process and urged them to do all they could "to make sure they are part of the solution and not part of the problem".

Lebanon

Latest developments

- Rival Lebanese leaders have agreed on a deal to end the political deadlock that has led to the country's worst violence since the 1975-90 civil war in which over 60 people were killed.
- The Western-backed government and the pro-Syrian opposition arrived at the deal after five days of talks held in Qatar under the auspices of the Arab League.
- The deal is seen as a major victory for Hezbollah whose key demands in the recent negotiations have been met. Under the deal, the opposition - led by Hezbollah - will have the power of veto in a new cabinet of national unity.
- The new deal also does not call for Hezbollah to disarm, a key stumbling block in negotiations up until now. Instead it only bans the use of arms in internal conflicts, while still allowing Hezbollah to maintain its arsenal of weapons which it says is needed in the fight against Israel.
- The deal will allow for the election of Michel Suleiman, commander of the Lebanese Army, as the new president. The election is set to go ahead on Sunday (25 May), having been postponed 20 times since November 2007.

Background

- Recent violence was sparked by the government's attempt to shut down Hezbollah's telecoms network. This followed the decision to remove the Chief of Security at Beirut airport for allowing Hezbollah to install a secret airport surveillance system without government approval.
- Over days of intense fighting (7-10 May) Hezbollah stormed west Beirut, taking over large parts of the city and surrounding Beirut international airport forcing it to come to a complete standstill. Clashes ended when Hezbollah agreed to relinquish control over the areas it had seized to the Lebanese army following an army statement announcing the reinstatement of the airport security chief and the decision to put Hezbollah's controversial communications network under army supervision instead of dismantling it altogether.
- Ahead of the deal being agreed today, Foreign Secretary David Miliband expressed "grave concern" over the situation in Lebanon. During a press conference yesterday (20 May) he said:

"...anyone who is concerned about the stability of the Middle East needs to be concerned about the situation in the Lebanon - the standoff that occurred over the last ten days - and about the prospects for establishing a democratic government in the Lebanon that commands the confidence of its people." (21/05/08)

Hamas-Israel ceasefire talks

- Egypt has recently been playing an active role in trying to broker a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman said he had “high expectations” that a deal could be reached after meeting Israeli officials on 12 May to present the results of his talks with Hamas.
- Israel has not officially responded to the offer although Egypt announced yesterday (20 May) that Israel had accepted the general terms of the deal but had not accepted Hamas’ demand that Israel open the borders into Gaza. Egypt said that Hamas is due to officially respond to Israel’s proposals by the end of the week.
- Israel is not willing to allow the crossings into Gaza to be totally open because it fears that despite any ceasefire, Hamas would use the open borders to rearm and smuggle weapons into Gaza.