



**Reckless
Posturing Sparks
Renewed Tensions
Between Syria
and Israel**

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Reckless Posturing Sparks Renewed Tensions Between Syria and Israel

Key Points

- Israel's continued threats and belligerence toward its neighbouring states could plunge the region into all-out war. Given the current regional dynamics, it would be most prudent for Israel to come to a comprehensive peace agreement with the strategically placed Syria in order to avoid further escalation.
- Israel's political leadership and its defence establishment are deeply divided over the proposed methods of securing this peace with Syria. While senior members in the military believe it can be achieved through a deal to include the return of Syria's Golan Heights and thereby remove it from its current alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, others are of the opinion that force should be used to break the alliance.
- Israeli Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, would like a peace deal with Syria but does not want to return the Golan Heights. The alternative appears to be a very risky war on three fronts; Lebanon, Syria and Iran.
- Syria is prepared to go to the negotiating table with Israel providing it accedes to its demand for the return of its land. It is equally prepared to go to war.

Introduction

Tensions between long time adversaries Syria and Israel came to a head this month following an outburst of incendiary remarks and threats by the ultra-nationalist Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. This development not only hampers any imminent prospects of a peace deal between the two states, but has also led to speculation over the possibility of a regional war.

The escalation was prompted by a statement from Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak, in which he told senior army officers that "in the absence of an arrangement with Syria, we are liable to enter a belligerent clash with it that could reach the point of all-out war." Given the standard Israeli rhetoric coupled with recent threats made against several of its neighbours including Gaza, Syria, Southern Lebanon and Iran, when Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem was asked at a press conference about Mr. Barak's comments, interpreting them as an ultimatum, he replied that they "heightened the risk of war in the region." He went on to add that should a



war break out at this particular point in time, even if it were waged just against Syria or Southern Lebanon, it would become widespread and that it would move into Israeli cities. As such he advised Israel to “Return to reason, follow the path of peace... and implement the requirements of peace fairly and comprehensively.”

The notoriously bellicose Israeli Foreign Minister, considering such comments a direct threat and an affront to Israel’s national pride, in turn threatened the Syrian president himself [stating](#) “Assad should know that if he attacks, he will not only lose the war. Neither he nor his family will remain in power” “our message should be that if Assad’s father lost a war but remained in power, the son should know that an attack would cost him his regime.” Lieberman went on to add that Syria should relinquish any aspirations of having the Golan Heights ever returned to them – the pivotal Syrian demand in any peace agreement.

During a meeting between the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Spanish Foreign Minister, Mr. Assad is reported to have said that “Israel is not serious about achieving peace since all facts point out that Israel is pushing the region towards war, not peace.” Israeli threats coupled with Lieberman’s reckless statements and a recent drive for legislation giving tax benefits to approximately 30 settler communities in the Golan Heights certainly reinforces this notion and conveys the message that Israel has no real intention to return the Syrian land to them.

The Israeli Prime Minister, in an apparent attempt to diffuse the situation asked all ministers to refrain from commenting on the Syrian issue. His office also released a statement reiterating Israel’s interest in pursuing peace and carrying out diplomatic negotiations with Syria without preconditions. It also stated that Israel will continue to act decisively against any threats. The Syrian position is that they are equally prepared to talk peace or to go to war.

The Israel-Syria Conflict and ‘Peace Process’

Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria during the 1967 war and in 1981 attempted to formally annex it in a move unrecognised under international law. The primary source of contention between the neighbouring states is the continued Israeli occupation of this strategic plateau which dominates the territory on either side of the 1967 cease fire lines as well as Syria’s ties with Iran and with militant groups in the South of Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. Syria demands the return of the Golan Heights as the cost of any deal.



In 2008 there were several rounds of indirect talks between the two mediated by Turkey however these broke down following the invasion of Gaza. Within Israel there is a split between the defence establishment and the political leadership on the matter of the return of the Golan Heights. Israel's senior military leadership backed by Washington, are of the opinion that peace with Syria offers the most promising avenue for wider peace which is well worth the price being asked. Peace with Syria is part of the US strategy to isolate Iran and secure domination of the region.

Israel's Fear of Syria; the Heart of the North-Eastern Axis

Israel regards Syria as a major political and strategic adversary. Damascus' diplomatic clout has increased in recent years and continues to increase having nurtured diffuse regional ties and thus built and maintains influence in the entire region. In particular is the alliance it has forged with both Iran and Turkey. Geographically, Syria shares borders with both Israel and Lebanon and links Iran with Hezbollah. The relatively new minefields constructed by Israel as part of the "Syrian barrier" designed to hamper any surprise attack to recapture the Golan Heights betray a growing fear of Syria itself. Although Syria probably could not individually sustain all-out war with Israel, it could carry out a strategic ground attack to regain its territory and the upper in any future negotiations.

On the other hand Israel's actions during Operation Cast Lead have galvanised regional opposition to it and caused it to lose its closest and most powerful ally in the region – Turkey. According to certain sources, Israeli tactics for combating 'terrorist groups' has led to Syria's strategic decision "not to allow Israel to defeat resistance forces in the region"

The Syria-Lebanon-Hizbollah alliance

Binyamin Netanyahu recently accused Lebanon of allowing Hezbollah to increase its stockpile of weapons capable of reaching Israeli towns. Some sources suggest that in recent weeks the calibre of weaponry being supplied has also been significantly upgraded. Syria is reputedly the main conduit through which these



weapons reach Hezbollah. This coupled with the fear that Hezbollah may seek revenge for Israel's assassination of its military chief Imad Mughniyeh two years ago this month, along with threats have led to growing concerns within Beirut that it may soon be attacked. Hezbollah has raised its state of alert and warned senior figures to exercise caution as they may be targeted.

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri has stated that the country will stand united in the case of an external attack despite any internal divisions the country may face. He expressed concern over Israel's escalating threats toward themselves and Syria and anger over continued Israeli incursions into Lebanese air space. Syria has stated that any threat to Lebanese security and stability will be considered a threat to their own security. Given Syria's proximity to Hezbollah located in the Beka'a valley, there is considerable anxiety that should Hezbollah clash with Israel, Syria with its own considerable missile arsenal will be drawn into the war or at the very least, provide assistance.

The Syria-Iran alliance

In the wake of President Ahmedinejad's announcement that Iran will further enrich its uranium stockpiles, international sanctions loom. In addition, following the expiration of an informal deadline for nuclear negotiations at the end of last year, talk of a US or Israeli led military strike against the state have also intensified. Should Iran, which has control over Hezbollah's missile arsenal, retaliate against Israel this could lead to all-out war which could once again draw Syria in.

Hezbollah's missile arsenal is a more immediate threat than Iranian enrichment activity, however it is yet to be seen whether Israel will hit Hezbollah before Iran. In either scenario, it appears that Syria will be drawn in and the question remains as to whether Israel is willing to enter a multi-front war.

Despite Israel's perceived military upper hand this would be a fruitless and incredibly risky endeavour particularly given that Syria has shown the inclination toward a peace deal which would avoid war. The last time Israel attempted the like, had it not been for US intervention, it would have faced catastrophe.



Lieberman's posturing in Context: Israel's Domestic Framework

Avigdor Lieberman is the head of the ultra-nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party who campaigned for office on a platform of national pride, bigotry and racism. His core constituency consist mainly of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, many of whom adhere to a hawkish world view and are used to an authoritarian political culture which admires extremist leaders. Lieberman, himself an immigrant and a settler, casts himself in this role as defender of Israeli national pride; bullying, threatening and hurling abuse.

Lieberman's comments in the current spat with Syria underscore an overlap between internal and external Israeli politics as well as disagreements between the political and military leadership. His comments, while aimed at the Syrian regime, were intended for the benefit of his voters as well as the defence establishment who consider it necessary to reach an agreement with Syria and have maintained for years that it can be removed from its current alliance with Iran and Hezbollah. Lieberman represents the view of those who would retain the Golan Heights and depend solely on Israel's military superiority as a deterrent to Syria. He is reported to have [said](#) "whoever thinks territorial concessions will disconnect Syria from the axis of evil is mistaken...we must make Syria realise that just as it relinquished its dream of greater Syria that controls Lebanon... that it will have to relinquish its ultimate demand regarding the Golan Heights."

Although Lieberman's comments have been criticised within Israel as irresponsible and he has been called a warmonger, many in Israel do not even consider the Golan Heights controversial and cannot envisage handing them back to Syria no matter the benefits; a situation that parallels their Prime Minister's claims to want peace while his foreign minister makes threats of war.

There is a dangerous complacency in Israel which they are being warned about. Their neighbours believe talk of peace is merely insidious propaganda intended for consumption by the media while their true intentions are to initiate a new war.



Conclusion

The threats and warnings exchanged between Syria and Israel obviously relate to the current dynamic between the two and including Syria's regional alliances with Iran and Hezbollah. It could be viewed as a bout of sabre rattling allowing for the avoidance of pressing domestic issues such as reaching a resolution on the issue of Palestine. Netanyahu appears to allow Lieberman these ridiculous outbursts and in this instance has quietly played him off against Ehud Barak in a good-cop, bad-cop routine to intimidate Syria into submission. Netanyahu is willing to talk peace, but is not willing to return the Golan Heights to Syria as demanded which he knows they will not accept. Alternatively, it could be viewed as a delicate situation that could indeed lead to all-out war on multiple fronts. Israel's best option would be to return to the negotiating table with Syria without precondition as advised by their defence establishment.

