

Web Commentary

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Hope in the Levant

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The simultaneous announcement of an agreement between government and opposition in Lebanon and of the start of indirect talks between Israel and Syria in Turkey might be the best news to come out of that troubled region for a long time. And while the United States favored neither the compromise over Lebanon that strengthens the position of Hizbollah nor the talks between Syria and Israel, these two developments may have a positive influence on stability in the region and on the Palestinian–Israeli peace process the Bush administration wants to succeed.

The package deal on Lebanon negotiated with the help of Qatar and the Arab League is to an extent a victory for Hizbollah, giving the Hizbollah-led opposition 11 portfolios in the 30-member government of national unity, thus the power to block major decisions. The March 14 coalition that controls the government now will name 16 ministers and the president three. Hizbollah and the government have also agreed on the immediate election of army chief Michel Suleiman as president, a return to the 1960 election law for the 2009 parliamentary election, and the renunciation by all sides of the use of weapons in internal conflicts. The agreement leaves intact Hizbollah’s militia as an “instrument of resistance against Israel,” though. While Hizbollah got what it wanted in the negotiations, Lebanon as a whole will also reap some benefits from the agreement. Lebanon will have a government, Hizbollah’s tent city that paralyzed the center of town was removed as soon as the agreement was announced, and the population will hopefully return to normal life. The slide into civil war that recently loomed as a distinct possibility has been halted.

The indirect talks being held between Syria and Israel under Turkish auspices have the potential for ending another dangerous stalemate which has often threatened to erupt into greater violence. At stake in these talks is not only the return of the Golan Heights and Peace between Israel and Syria, but also the fate of the peace process. Despite the staunchly optimistic assessments of the Bush administration, talks between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority led by President Mahmoud Abbas have not made progress. An agreement between Israelis and Palestinians is an even more remote possibility, because Hamas is not involved in the talks. Even if an agreement was reached, Abbas would still face the immense hurdle of convincing other groups to accept a deal. Equally important, while talks drag on in a desultory fashion, the two-state solution these talks aim to achieve is becoming an increasingly remote possibility. The

divisions among Palestinians, coupled with the continuing Israeli policy to create hard-to-dismantle facts on the ground by expanding the settlements, building barriers and special roads for settlers are looming as increasing insurmountable obstacles to a two-state solution. Negotiations between Syria and Israel, if successful, would force Syria to stop its one-sided support for Hamas and join efforts by Egypt and other Arab countries to bring about reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, thus removing at least one obstacle to the negotiations.

Syria has been seeking talks with Israel for its own reasons, not to help the peace process and even less to facilitate an agreement in Lebanon. Syria wants to regain control of the Golan Heights, the border region it lost to Israel in 1967. It would be a major victory for the otherwise lackluster regime of Bashar Asad, and a counterweight to the humiliation it suffered when it was forced to withdraw its troops from Lebanon in 2005. Because control of the Golan Heights is so important to it, the Syrian regime may be prevailed upon to scale back its support for Hamas and Hizbollah in return, thus foregoing the spoiler role it has played in the region in recent years. Much depends on the skill of the Turkish mediators.

The agreement between the Hizbollah-led opposition and the Lebanese government and the start of indirect negotiations between Syria and Israel run counter to the policies of the Bush administration, which has been pushing the Lebanese government not to compromise with Hizbollah and opposes Syrian–Israeli talks. The agreement in Lebanon was the direct result of negotiations with an organization considered terrorist by the United States, and came in the wake of Hizbollah-led violence. Talks with Syria, a rogue country allied with Iran, also fall in the category of “appeasement” according to the stance taken by President Bush in his May 15 speech to the Knesset. Yet, both developments carry the promise of progress, decreasing the chances of further conflict from which nobody would benefit.

The United States should support the new Lebanese president and the government of national unity. It should encourage the Syrian–Israeli talks—but it should stay out of the process, allowing Syria, Israel, and Turkey to get on with efforts that have come a considerable way so far.

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