About This Meeting

Global Political Trends Center of Istanbul Kültür University hosted two leading figures, Dr. Alon Liel and Dr. Ibrahim Soliman, who conducted the secret and unofficial negotiations held under the auspices of the Swiss government from 2004 to 2006. The eight rounds of dialogue, led by Dr. Liel and Dr. Soliman, concluded in an unofficial blueprint for an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement. In a round table discussion held on the premises of Istanbul Kültür University, Dr. Alon Liel and Dr. Ibrahim Soliman shared their assessments regarding the current Middle Eastern Politics and the possibility of peace between Israel and Syria. This Meeting Report was published with the aim to provide insight into the complexity of the regional dynamics of the Middle East as well as Second Track Diplomacy.

ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Dr. Alon Liel
Former Director-General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Chairman of the Labor Party, Chairman Israel-Syria Peace Society, Lecturer at Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Dr. Ibrahim Soliman
Syrian-American businessman and a former academic, Director of Syria-Israel Projects at Institute for Middle East Peace and Development

WELCOMING REMARKS

Dr. Mensur Akgün
Director, Global Political Trends Center

Today we have two distinguished personalities here. I would call them scholars because of their work in the field of academia.

Alon Liel is a senior Israeli politician and a diplomat. His long and distinguished career includes the post of Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel and the Chairmanship of the Labor Party.

Our second speaker is Ibrahim Soliman who is a Syrian-American businessman. He has been living in the U.S. for nearly fifty years. He has close contacts with his home country. He took part in the secret and unofficial talks between Syria and Israel.
Everything started in Turkey in January 2004. President Bashir Assad visited Turkey for the first Presidential visit ever from Syria. The last day of President Assad’s visit, he was in Istanbul and somehow we stayed in the same hotel. It was a coincidence. Some of the Turkish diplomats saw me in the hotel and told me that when I went back to Israel, I would have a call from Turkish Ambassador in Israel who would talk to me on the issue.

Two days after I came back from Turkey, the Turkish Ambassador in Israel called me and told me that President Assad asked PM Erdogan to mediate between Israel and Syria. The Turkish Ambassador added that President Assad told PM Erdogan that Syria desired peace with Israel. It was a quite important message to convey to the Israeli Prime Minister.

I told to the Turkish Ambassador in Israel that he could pass this message onto the Israeli Prime Minister. He told me that it took a long time to reach the PM of Israel. So, he wanted me to speak to the Israeli PM’s staff. I talked to them. The feedback that we got was quite negative. The argument Israelis were using was that the U.S. saw Syria as a negative force in the region. Also, Israeli officials said that they were asked to drive Assad into a corner. This was the answer we got in the first half of 2004. It was very frustrating.

Around April and May of 2004 we saw that we were getting nowhere, thus, we started discussing the possibility of Second Track attempt to talk unofficially. The Turkish Ambassador in Israel asked me about whom did I have in mind to play the role in the Second Track from the Syrian side. I recommended Ibrahim Soliman, who was recommended to me by an American friend who was known among my Israeli colleagues.

The Turkish Ambassador told me that they wanted to talk to him [Soliman]. We arranged a meeting in Damascus between the Turkish Ambassador in Syria and Ibrahim Soliman. Following this meeting, the Second Track started running. I don’t want to get into details what the report of the Turkish Ambassador in Syria was to Ankara.

In September of 2004, Turkish diplomats came to us and said that they dropped the Second Track initiative. Their argument was that “we did not succeed to incorporate officials into the process”. It was a pity. At that stage we established the structure of the Second Track. We found a budget and a Syrian counterpart whom we found very knowledgeable on the issue. Besides that we incorporated two Israelis who were very interested in the initiative.

I had a meeting just by coincidence with a senior Swiss diplomat – head of the Middle Eastern Affairs. I told him that we started building the Second Track mechanism between Israel and Syria. He told me that they would like to proceed on this issue. However, they had two conditions. The first condition was detailed reporting to the governments regularly. And the second condition was that they did not want documents ending up with signatures. They just wanted us to discuss the problem and raise ideas. Following that, we started working in Switzerland. We had a meeting every two or three months in Switzerland.

“I don’t want to get into details what the report of the Turkish Ambassador in Syria was to Ankara.”

Dr. Alon Liel

Now, let me explain the mechanism of the Second Track. We had a meeting with Soliman every two or three months. In between, a lot of work was done. I was going to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs for reporting. Our partner was going to Syria with the Swiss diplomats. We were not representing the governments in anyway, but we were reporting. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs knew what we were doing. The Swiss insisted that we had to report about our work to the highest possible diplomatic level in Israel and Syria.

So, Israel and Syria knew about the idea. I can tell you on an unofficial basis that from the
body language of the people whom I told the idea of Second Track was very positive. The feedback that we got from the officials was very positive. But the initiative was not official. I was not asked to raise anything or drop any issue. The Israeli officials have always told me that they were not giving me blessing but they told me that I could do whatever I want. They told me that “If you want to report to us, we would receive you here”. By the way, apart from me, there were two more Israelis. One of them did not expose himself until today. But, the other one did, Uzi Arad.

After two years of work we felt that we have the main formula based on the shift of sovereignty of the Golan Heights to Syria, of full Israeli control on water resources of the Golan, de-militarization, normalization of diplomatic relations and a timetable of withdrawal between five to fifteen years. Also, the main idea was that part of the Golan Heights would become a Park where permanent residency would be forbidden. Besides, Israelis would be able to enter the Park without a visa.

I will explain the idea of Peace Park in the Golan Heights. As you know that the majority in Israelis against the withdrawal from the Golan Heights even in exchange for peace. We always told Ibrahim Soliman that “It is impossible for the Israeli politicians to withdraw from the Golan because there is no enough public support for it”. We wanted to create a situation that Israelis, after the withdrawal, would be able to function and to feel compatible at least on the part of the Golan that is close to the Sea of Galilee. We thought that this idea of the Peace Park, if it is understood well in Israel, might help us.

Now, I want to talk about the current Israeli-Syrian relations. When I entered the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 1971, the historical foreign policy of Israel was that whenever an Arab leader wanted to speak to Israel, we spoke to him. We were not asking questions whether he was a democratic ruler or not. This was one of the main features of our foreign policy. To tell you the truth, I was ashamed when I got negative answer from the Israeli side because they knew that this was not our traditional foreign policy principle. I was even more ashamed when they said that “The Americans do not want us to speak to Syria”.

The foreign policy of the U.S. as a superpower is very different from that of the Middle Eastern countries. The U.S. involves everything around the globe. The policy of the contemporary U.S. administration is that the countries which are friendly to the U.S. are in the white list. And the countries which are not friendly to the U.S. are in the black list. Thus, the U.S. foreign policy is working with two different lists: a white list and a black list. Their policy is to be nice to the countries which are in the white list and to threaten the countries which are in the black list. Today what is going on in Annapolis is exactly based on this U.S. foreign policy principle. The good players are invited to Annapolis, treated well, promised assistance. On the other hand, the bad guys are not invited. This policy contradicts with the Israeli policy.

Since Israel was established, each state was our enemy. If the current American policy had been the policy of Israel, we would not have progressed in the peace process. Having a peace conference composing merely moderate states is a war conference. Such a peace conference means that you invite the moderates for strengthening them in order to win the battle against the bad countries.

So, what you do in Annapolis is not peace, you just strengthened the coalition of the moderates. This is not only by excluding Syria or Iran, but also by excluding Hamas. The message to Mahmoud Abbas is “We will assist
you in every means”. This message to Ismail Haniyeh is “We hate you”. This policy of the U.S. ruins the life of the Palestinian people. It is deepening the rift inside the Palestinian people. How can we establish a Palestinian state? Such a policy based on assisting Mahmoud Abbas and isolating Hamas, is a very naïve approach. I think we should not give up insisting on talks with Hamas and Syria. If you want real peace, you have to make peace with your real enemies.

Therefore, Annapolis is going to fail. Israel cannot withdraw from the West Bank as long as the Palestinian people are fighting with each other. We cannot establish a Palestinian state in the West Bank while we are fighting with Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. There is no way that the Israeli government can get a majority from the Israeli public to such a peace agreement with Palestinians. Even if they find few lines of nice words in Annapolis statement, nothing can happen later as long as the rift continues among Palestinians.

It is very dangerous to invite forty states to Annapolis, which may create enormous expectations. I think the Americans are making a big mistake by excluding some players of the region. They will have a show in Annapolis and later we will have a war in our region. It is very sad to see the U.S. administration playing games instead of dealing with the real problems of our region. So, these are my opening remarks.

Dr. Ibrahim Soliman

Alon covered very much what we have done in Switzerland. It was hard but we produced a very important paper, which we are proud of. I believe even years from now if there is a peace agreement between Syria and Israel, what we have accomplished will be the key to the agreement between these two countries.

A formal peace agreement between Syria and Israel is needed. It will be the key to a comprehensive peace between Israel and the rest of the Arab world. Without peace with Syria, there cannot be comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arabs. We cannot accomplish Arab-Israeli comprehensive peace in the Middle East unless Syria regains its territory and has complete control in the Golan Heights.

Peace is possible between Syria and Israel. All of the pieces of the puzzle are in place. What is needed is leadership decision and the will of the people backing their leaders in Israel, in Syria and in the U.S.

“\nIt was hard but we produced a very important paper, which we are proud of. I believe even years from now if there is a peace agreement between Syria and Israel, what we have accomplished will be the key to the agreement between these two countries.”

Dr. Ibrahim Soliman

President Bashir Assad has been calling Israel to sit down with him to talk peace. The Syrian people are behind their President in his drive for peace. Unfortunately, the U.S. administration and the Israeli government are not answering President Assad’s call for peace. The U.S. and Israel ideally are missing a good opportunity and a good chance for peace with Syria.

Peace cannot be accomplished between six to ten months because everything has to be agreed between the two parties. The sticking point of peace between Syria and Israel during the 1990’s was the Syrian sovereignty over the Golan Heights and the Israeli sovereignty over the water resources in the region. The people in the 1990s failed to find the solution for it. Without solving this problem there cannot be peace between Israel and Syria, because the redlines of peace with Syria is the Syrian sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

We came out from our talks in Switzerland with a beautiful and simple formula. This adjusted that Syria will have a complete sovereignty over the Golan Heights but a part of the Golan Heights will be returned to the International Peace Park. Through this solution, Syria will have what it demands – the sovereignty over the Golan. Israel will have what it demands – the sovereignty over the water flow. Also, Syria will guarantee not to interfere into the natural flow of water into the Sea of Galilee.
I know that the leadership of both sides welcomes this solution of the problem. But what makes them hesitate on sitting down and implementing such a plan to have peace. Unfortunately, it is the U.S.

The U.S., apparently, is telling Israel the time for peace with Syria is not now. When Israel listens to the U.S., Israeli lives and futures are in jeopardy. From the first day of Israel’s existence, my understanding that the Israeli leadership said: “We will talk to any Arab country in anytime, in anyplace about peace.” Now, here is a President [Bashir Assad] calling and asking to talk about peace with Israel. Israel says “No”.

Peace with Syria has a lot of benefits. Peace with Syria will help to solve the problem in Lebanon. Peace with Syria will help Israel in dealing with Hezbollah. Peace with Syria will help to stabilize the situation in Iraq. Peace with Syria will help to control different factions of the Palestinian group which causes Israel problems, which have headquarters in Damascus. Moreover, peace with Syria can play a very effective part in bringing a better understanding between West and Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Syria can play a mediator role between the West and Iran.

What happened on September 6th when Israel attacked the North-Eastern part of Syria, was very unfortunate. The international community in general and the Arab world in particular kept silent about the attack. That was a shame. The international community and the Arab world should have condemned Israel for its attack on Syria. At the same time, the international community and the Arab world should praise the Syrian leadership because of their ability to control the anger and not retaliate to Israeli attack. For Syria, not retaliating to Israeli attack on September 6th is the proof that Syria desires peace with Israel.

Since the Madrid Conference, the U.S. has tried to mediate a peace treaty between Syria and Israel. First in Washington and later in Shepherdstown, the U.S. failed in brokering a peace treaty between Syria and Israel. In my opinion, one thing is clear: only the U.S. is capable for brokering a peace treaty between Syria and Israel.

The meeting in Annapolis is doomed to fail. Peace between Israel and Palestinians is too complex. The logical thing to do is to arrange a peace conference anywhere to discuss peace between Syria and Israel. This is possible. After Syrian-Israeli Peace, the way will be clear for Syria and for Israel to work together for solving the complex peace between Israel and the Palestinian Authorities.

Dr. Mensur Akgün

I just want to emphasize one thing that it is a perfect example for an academic study what you are telling us since we have our students here. I think this is really marvelous example for a Second Track Diplomacy. It is a real case study.

Before giving the floor to Yalım Eralp, I would like to ask a question to the only official here, Mordehai Amihai: Why does Israel decline the Syrians’ call for reviving peace talks?

Mordehai Amihai
Consul General of Israel in Istanbul

My feeling is that the picture portrayed here by both Dr. Liel and Dr. Soliman is not the full picture. As far as I understand when President Bishar Assad is talking about the negotiations with Israel that he insists that we shall start from where we ended negotiations with PM Barak. If I remember correctly, the Syrians are the ones who walked out on a very generous offer by the Israeli government that basically included everything that you are talking about.
By the way, I would like to ask a question: you are talking about a full Syrian sovereignty on the Golan and at the same time Israeli sovereignty on the water. I don’t understand this. As far as I understand that sovereignty is not something that can be divided. You either have it or not to have it. Once the full sovereignty is given to Syria, it is theirs. Then, we are up to their mercy as far as our water resources are concerned.

The reply of the Israeli government to Assad was not a blank “No”. We do not have any confidence in President Assad not because he did not react to the supposed Israeli attack to Syria, but because he is hosting terror organization in Damascus, because he is the chief ally of the Iranians who have declared to wipe out Israel of the map in the region, because he is meddling in Iraq and Lebanon. You [Ibrahim Soliman] in a way admitted to all those events, because when you said the benefits, you hinted all these Syrian activities.

So, if the Syrian President is sincere in his will to establish peace with Israel, how does he combine with these kinds of policies? I also did not quite understand what Alon was saying about Hamas. Do you [Alon] suggest us to invite Hamas and Hezbollah to Annapolis? Is this what you are talking about?

Dr. Ibrahim Soliman

When you are talking about Syria walking out of the room, you mean during the summit where President Clinton and President Hafez Assad met in Geneva. President Hafez Assad came to Geneva with his staff to sign an agreement.

But, President Clinton received a phone call from PM Barak himself telling him that he changed his mind. Clinton wanted to negotiate with President Hafez Assad who did not want to negotiate after PM Barak’s answer. Thus, President Hafez Assad wanted to leave. The Syrian President did not change his mind, the PM of Israel did. This is point number one.

Point number two is about President Bashir Assad’s seriousness about peace. I was asked the same question when I addressed to Knesset in April. President Bashar Assad said that he was ready to talk with the Israelis for peace without any condition. The members of Knesset said that they wanted to have peace with Syria, but they did not believe in President Bashir Assad.

Bashir Assad and his people behind him want peace. He needs peace, not only does he want it. As to Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad: why should Syria help Israel and the U.S. solve their problem with them while (1) Syrian land is occupied by Israel; and (2) while the U.S. and Israel do not talk with Syria? Iran is the only country in the world that is very close friend to Syria. You are asking Syria to turn its back to Iran before you give Syria some other place to live on. They cannot do that. You make peace with Syria and Syria associates itself the way it wants but not beforehand.

Syria is willing to do anything after peace, but not before peace.

Dr. Alon Liel

There is one question here on the issue of Hamas. I belong to the part of the Israeli society which believes that we need two states next to each other – Israel and Palestine. I think this part of the population is majority in Israel today. It took many years by the way. The idea of two states was not accepted by the majority of Israeli population in a short time. It is relatively a recent thing. I am against three states or four states. I am in favor of two.

If we go on to finalize an agreement with Abu Mahzen before he settles his problems with Hamas; in practical terms we will have three Palestinian states. One is in the West Bank, recognized by the U.S. and the U.N., second one is in Gaza, not recognized by anyone, and I think we will have a third one because Israeli Arabs will come up with their demands in such a case. So it is very easy to say that ‘ignore the Hamas’. I am not in favor of Israel talking to Hamas unless Hamas wants to talk to Israel. But I think the policy of dividing the Palestinians into two people will be the end of the chance to establish one Palestinian state.

Now, the Palestinian problem is more urgent than the Syrian problem. Every year the number of settlers is growing and we have to deal with it. But it is impossible to deal with it at this stage. There is no way we can remove the
settlements. There is a big risk if the [Israeli] army leaves the West Bank. I don’t know what will happen in the West Bank. Although see the urgency of establishing the Palestinian state, trying to do it with Abu Mahzen will be a terrible mistake.

I want to tell you something. I was in the team that worked on the Middle East and was involved the negotiations with Lebanon. We signed a peace agreement with Lebanon. And we opened an Embassy in Beirut. Lebanese Embassy was in Jerusalem, not in Tel Aviv. Lebanese flag was waving in Jerusalem. So, we had a partner and look where we are with Lebanon.

I think, we have a similar situation with Palestinians. Abu Mahzen is officially the President, and by the way, he did not win the last elections. But Abu Mahzen has no ability to be the leader of the Palestinian people at the moment. So, to go on with Abu Mahzen, just because he is a good guy is a mistake. And this is what I am saying. You don’t negotiate with a nice a guy, you negotiate with a guy who has the ability to lead.

Yalım Eralp
Lecturer, Istanbul Kültür University

There are two possibilities either the U.S. administration is utterly unwise – and that may be the case – or the Americans want the turmoil in the Middle East to continue. Because there is no term according to the French logic, it is either/or. The U.S. administration can see what you gentlemen see, what many people see.

When you said the Americans prevented negotiations, it takes places often. In 1976, the Turkish Foreign Minister wanted to make a gesture to Greece in a meeting with Dr. Kissinger. Dr. Kissinger said “No, give it to me. Let me give it to the Greeks”. I understand that this is an instinct of a superpower. I am asking your inner instinct as to what the U.S. does? Is it absurdity or is it a strategy of continuation of turmoil in the Middle East?

Cengiz Çandar
Lecturer, Istanbul Kültür University

Let me continue where Ambassador Eralp left. He started saying that the U.S. administration might be utterly unwise. I think this issue that we are dealing with now which is the subject of your talk here is one of the most intractable problems that we have faced in international politics. If we assume for a moment the U.S. administration is unwise or President Bush is not a good guy or the Americans want turmoil in the Middle East or the Americans are the main stumbling block on the road to peace in the Middle East, so let’s just jump our minds to the period of a good guy, Bill Clinton, who initiated the peace talks.

There were direct negotiations during his presidency without the Second Track Diplomacy. In Shepherdstown, under the endorsement of the Clinton administration, the Syrian FM, Faruq al-Shara and the Israeli PM Ehud Barak met. And it yielded nothing. Then with the Palestinians, not like this poor Abu Mahzen but formidable Yasser Arafat was in Camp David. It was endless talks for more than three weeks between Clinton, Arafat and Barak. It did not work.

So, the issue, when it comes to Israel on one side, and the Arabs on the other side, and the ground is Middle East is very complex and complicated. So all your nice efforts on the Second Track Diplomacy as Mensur rightly described it, could be a very interesting academic case study. What you are doing seems to heal when the international circumstances are right.

So, what I am trying to conclude as a question: in this Second Track activity how do you define the international circumstances? Where could it lead?

Everything in this region is interconnected with each other. In order to get Syria into a peace treaty, you have to give something to Syria that should be more than the Golan or the
sovereignty of the Golan. Because you can’t treat Syria other than the axis that it belongs to. It has an axis with Iran. So, you have to pay some price to buy Syria. So is this a stumbling block for example the connection of Syria with Iran? How to detach Syria from Iran? How to get Syria not acting as a troublemaker in Lebanon?

It is no big secret that in every assassination that has taken place in Lebanon starting with the assassination of the former PM Rafik Hariri. There is an international court which has been established under the aegis of the U.N. Proceedings of that international court will lead to Damascus. So under these circumstances, how will you treat Syria as a partner for peace?

As a concluding remarks, I am afraid that I will differ somewhat from Dr. Soliman that Syria opt to not to retaliate to the Israeli attack on September 6th. He says it is an important proof that Syria wants peace. There is a different reading to it: Syria had no power to retaliate. It was weak enough not to retaliate. Maybe that was the reasons of this attack that to deter Syria, or to signal a message to Syria or beyond Syria to Iran. I am not defending the rightness or the fairness of Israeli actions. But, as an observer, when reading these things, we can’t be naïve to name that some people are peace loving, and the other people are belligerent.

Don’t try to convince us that the U.S. is so bad, that these kinds of initiatives could not move further. Even if the U.S. is the worst thing in the world, there has to be some convincing reason why these kinds of initiatives stay where they are. The best-intentioned American leader, who wanted to get the Nobel Prize, Bill Clinton, brought the Syrian and the Israeli leaders to Washington. It did not work. So, there must be other reasons and if the Americans are so bad, then go home. You can’t do anything while the bad Americans are in office now.

This is the approach that I just wanted to present to you and wait for your response.

Dr. Alon Liel

Cengiz Çandar and Ambassador Yalım Eralp directed two mega-questions. I want to tell you a story. In 1996, Ehud Barak won the elections. I was his Foreign Affairs Adviser. We were sitting in a building where the party led its campaign. He was thinking who would be the Ministers and so on. He told me that what we would do in the Peace Process. I came up with several ideas and he asked me about Syria. I told him that I did not have any connections in Syria. He told me that I must come up with something about Syria. I told him that I had a friend, a journalist, that I could take him to Israel to talk with him regarding Syria. He told me to take him to Israel.

I called my friend and told him that Ehud Barak just won the elections. And I asked him that whether or not he could come to Israel. He said that he was coming. He came to Israel and we had six meetings with the government.

During one of our meetings, Ehud Barak took a page and started drawing. He drew one wall and opposite to it another wall. He said that this was nothing and added that “This wall could fall in any minute if we don’t connect it with the roof and the floor. Only if we connect it, these two walls with the floor and a roof, it is considered as a building”. Then he told my journalist friend to go to Assad and tell him that he sees a peace between Israel and Syria as critical for the continuation of the peace process. My friend went to Hafez Assad and delivered Barak’s message. The initiative ended up with nothing.

I told this story because today’s Defense Minister Ehud Barak tries to revive Israeli-Syrian peace process. We cannot stop with Egypt and Jordan. The peace walls that we built with
Egypt and Jordan could fall if we do not strengthen them with peace with Syria.

We have peace wall with Egypt standing twenty-five years. We did not play even a soccer game with Egypt during these twenty-five years. What kind of peace is this? So to take the risk of not having a momentum is something Israel cannot afford.

Now, I want to say something about the U.S. I think unwise or evil are not the right terms for Americans. I think the right term for the U.S. is a missionary superpower. Few years ago, I had a meeting in Istanbul with the former American Ambassador. In that meeting, he was talking about the Greater Middle East Initiative and so on. I told him that I was involved in the New Middle East meetings in the 1990s with Shimon Peres. I told him that what kind of reaction we got and he told me that we didn’t know them. He said that “Look what we did in Eastern Europe. We would do the same in the Middle East”.

They are trying to bring American principles to Baghdad, to Damascus. I don’t know how to call it unwise or naïve. They are one hundred percent sure that their principles are the correct principles, but the other part of the world has different list of priorities. Money, democracy, business is not everything. So it does not work. This is the policy. It is so simple, so clear, but so foolish too. This is the reason that U.S. is failing in the Middle East. The U.S. has very different priorities. Israel is closer to the Middle East than the U.S. They have the wrong policy towards the Middle East. What you see in Washington is not what you see in Tel Aviv or Ankara or Europe.

On the other hand, Israeli administration does not want to waste energy to argue with the U.S. The U.S. is such a big friend of Israel. But, they are wrong. Things are very complicated in the Middle East that is why we have to deal with them urgently. Every year we postpone solving the problems. The situation of Israel is getting worse. We are wasting our precious time.

Dr. Ibrahim Soliman

I will answer your question about the U.S. whether it is unwise or not. Israel puts the blame on the U.S. for not negotiating with Syria. In my opinion, Israel can negotiate with Syria the way they negotiated with Jordan without the presence of the U.S. After Israel and Jordan got the result from their negotiations, they gave it to the U.S. to adopt it and having a partner to sign the contract. If Israel wanted to negotiate with Syria, it would. I will not accept their claim that the U.S. is preventing them from negotiations. In Shepherdstown, Israelis and Syrians started to work together. They were not negotiating. But, they were trying to find a solution. But somehow the media reported about what was going on and publicized it. Following that both sides got scared and everyone started to play a patriotic role. This is the reason that Shepherdstown failed.

The first step in our case, I was on my way to Israel in January 2007 to address the Herzliya Conference. I was having lunch with some officials in Switzerland. Someone came and told me that our work became public. I felt that somebody stabbed me from my back. I did not know what to do. I called Israel, Syria and Washington. All of them knew what we were doing. I asked them what I should do. They were mad because what happened. They told me to go back. I changed my ticket instead of continue to Herzliya. I went back to Washington.

The next step in our point, they wanted to take the results of our work with the Swiss and give it to the Americans to adopt it as an American roadmap towards the Syrian-Israeli Peace. Suddenly, Alon and I disappeared, nobody heard about us. They killed the whole project. Israel, Syria and the U.S. denied. Having peace with Syria and Israel, you have to work out all the points and agree on it in secret without the media knowing what you are doing. When you agree on everything then you give to Americans to adopt and present it. That was our aim of our work.
The other question was about the price Syria must pay. The only price that Syria can pay is to help bring peace, stability and prosperity to the region. They will not be allowed any attacks on Israel or transfer of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah. They will stop making problems and many other things in Lebanon.

Now, you mentioned assassinations in Lebanon. I don’t think anybody knows who is behind the assassinations. Everyone is innocent until proven guilty. But within five minutes of the assassination, Syria was blamed. That is not fair. Prove that Syria was behind it, then judge Syria. Don’t sentence Syria before you prove it guilty. I could say that Israel is killing the leaders of Lebanon to blame it on Syria. I don’t know who is right. All these are possibilities. So it is not fair at all to blame Syria for these assassinations unless you have a proof.

Moreover, about the Israeli attack on Syria carried out on September 06th, maybe Syria was afraid to retaliate. But you know that Syria has, maybe, one hundred times more missiles than Hezbollah has. Syria knows that if they retaliate, there will be bloodshed. I believe that Syria did not retaliate because President Bashir Assad wants to make peace. The U.S. must start working for peace. Israel must put blame on the U.S. for preventing peace with Syria.

**Dr. Alon Liel**

I will explain something based on a lot of information that we accumulated during this year. PM Olmert was very unhappy when our initiative was revealed. As far as I know, he checked Bashir Assad’s seriousness to negotiate with Israel through several channels including Turkey. The answer that he got was that President Assad wanted to negotiate with Israel but he wanted the Americans in the room.

The answer was surprising because the U.S. is so close to Israel and hates Syrians so much. Why does President Assad want Americans in the room? The logic was kind of an Egyptian logic in 1980’s. If you sign an agreement with Israel, it has to be a package deal as Egypt moved from the Soviet Camp to the Western Camp. In order to move somebody from the Iranian camp to the Western Camp, it has to be decided in Washington. So President Assad demanded Americans to come in. If you would ask me to leave Syria and Israel in the room alone, I would say no. Olmert cannot sign a peace treaty with Syria on the Golan Heights if it does not include Syria’s disassociation from Iran. He will not get support from the Israeli public for such an agreement. That was the reason Olmert went to President Bush in June this year. Bush told him, “You could go alone.” The Americans knew that they had to be in the room in order to enable the agreement. So, there was an American veto.

This was the reason that I blamed the Americans. I am pretty confident that in May this year, Olmert was determined to go on the Syrian channel if the Americans would have allowed including paying the price. A senior Israeli journalist, who spoke with PM Olmert before his journey to the U.S., told me that PM Olmert was really resolute to move ahead on the Syrian issue. So I put the blame on the U.S.

**Mordehai Amihai**

First of all, when it comes to the interest of major importance for the national security of Israel, Israel acts against the American interest. Israel took courageous decisions in the past. The last example is Oslo Agreement signed by the government of Israel without the knowledge of the Americans. I assure you that if the Israeli government trusts the other side, it will go far with or without the American blessing. This is one thing.

The second thing, Mr. Soliman paints a very rosy picture about the Middle East following the Israeli-Syrian Peace. It is also very nice to believe that Syrians will break all their ties with the Iranians and we shall live in peace once there is a peace between Israel and Syria. What if the Syrians invite Iranians to the Golan Height after we sign a peace treaty with Syria? I assume that you [Soliman] have not seen the Golan Height from the Israeli side. Have you?

“Syrians have to work very hard in order to convince Israel that they are really sincere in their efforts. For Israel, Iran is the biggest strategic threat... Security comes first in Israeli politics.”

**Mordehai Amihai**
Have you ever seen the Golan Height from up and down from the valley? Have you ever seen the shelters of the Israelis where they used to live for years in the underground in order to protect themselves? Israel did not take the Golan Heights just because it wanted more territory. Israel was attacked several times by the Syrians from the Golan Heights. Last time, the Syrian army reached almost the center of Galilee.

So, this is a major strategic asset. Syrians have to work very hard in order to convince Israel that they are really sincere in their efforts. For Israel, Iran is the biggest strategic threat to the very existence of the State of Israel. This is not something that we can wait and see until, maybe, Assad will change his mind. Israel is a country that cannot lose any war. This is something which is a basic conviction of every Israeli leader. Security comes first in Israeli politics. A lot of efforts must be done from the Syrian side before negotiations start.

My last word to Alon, I lost you completely on the Hamas, on the Palestinian threat. You [Alon] recommend us not to go to Annapolis. You said, “Wait until Hamas and Fatah make peace”. What you are practically saying is to give peace to the hands of the terrorists. So what you are saying basically, on one side “Time is pressing”, on the other side “Don’t do anything”. I do not agree.

What Annapolis is saying is that we stick to the road map which means we still insist on putting an end to terrorism but at the same time we are giving the Palestinians a political horizon.

We are willing now to negotiate about the final status of the Palestinian state.

We are willing now to negotiate the core issues: Jerusalem, refugees, borders, settlements and everything. We believe that we can reach an agreement with the Palestinians, but the implementation will depend on what is happening on the ground. For that reason, I believe that Annapolis is a success. It already is a success. Forty states, including the Saudis, will be there and will support the Palestinian moderates. So, once this message will be given, Annapolis will be a success.

Dr. Alon Liel

The only really interesting thing for me in Annapolis will be the menu of the dinner; nothing beyond it. I believe that declaration and what will happen after the conference will be a joke. For me the most important thing is to move on the peace process where you have a chance not only to have the agreement, but also to implement it.

The only leading thing is the Saudi Plan. The Saudi Plan speaks on going back to 1967 border. I don’t care if you do first the Golan Heights or the West Bank. I agree that the Palestinian issue is more urgent. But, there is no chance that you can get support from the Israeli public for the withdrawal from the West Bank under the existing circumstances. So, why waste time with the Palestinian issue? On the other side, there is a better chance to have an agreement with Syria. If we cannot deal with the Palestinian issue, let us at least deal and with Syria and its implications on Hamas. Because Syria is a major player in what is going on inside the Palestinian people by hosting Khaled Meshaal and so on. The fact that I gave up the Palestinian issue for the time being is not because I don’t think it is urgent, but because I don’t think it is possible to move ahead.

I want to say a few sentences, if you will allow me, on the Second Track. There are no new ideas in Annapolis. Jerusalem, border, settlements and refugees are the main issues. Pressures from the superpower, public opinion polls are completely paralyzed. Only with the Second Track Diplomacy individuals can do
whatever they want. We don’t have to go by
government decisions or parliament decisions;
neither American decisions, nor public opinion
polls. So, you tackled the problem as they are
without these baggages of past commitments.
And that is the reason it will not work without
Second Track Diplomacy.

I think what will happen in the Israeli-Syrian
relations when the politicians pick it up will be
exactly or very close to what we did through
the last two years. They will g again through
the same issues. We only hope that our
discussion will save precious time.

Dr. Ibrahim Soliman

I would like to say some words regarding
Israel’s fear about Syria crossing the border
and attacking Israel. In 1974 Syria signed an
agreement with Israel. Since 1974, up to now,
not one bullet was fired in anger from the
Golan Heights into Israel.

Bora Bayraktar
Head, Foreign News Department of
CNN-Türk

I am a journalist traveling in the Middle East
nearly ten years. Most recently, I was in Syria. I
think not only the U.S. but also the regional
countries should thank Syria for accepting
three million refugees.

My question will be about the cost of peace.
You know that making peace has a cost.
Evacuating settlements, establishing security
system, building a Palestinian state needs
billions of dollars. I think it is easier to kill Hamas
and Islamic Jihad militants with missiles and to
invade Gaza. How much of the costs are a
barrier to peace?

Dr. Alon Liel

By the way, we blew up the settlements in
Sinai. We blew up the synagogues, settlements
and schools in Gaza. Enough is enough.
We don’t want to blow up the Golan Heights.
70,000 Israelis are living in the Golan Heights.
We have agricultural industry and tourism
industry in Golan Heights. The idea was to
leave the property as much as we can to the
Syrian sovereignty and to set up lively business
in order to avoid terrible damage, to ruin the
lives of the people.

I went to the Golan Heights several times. I met
the settlers who were 50 years old. They said
that they preferred to withdraw than to ruin
their professional lives by pulling out. They told
me that “We worked to build our life for 25
years. We cannot recover our savings if you
ruin our lives as you did it in Gaza”. The idea of
the park is basically an economic idea.

About the settlers, we will have to remove
70,000 settlers. That’s a huge check. I don’t
know who is going to pay. On the other hand, I
believe that it is not the issue of money. It is the
issue of people who do not want to live in any
other place. The public support of the removal
of the settlements in Israelis not enough.

By the way, when you have one hundred
percent security, the other side has zero
percent security. Is security the only
consideration of Israel in order to bring peace?
You will never bring peace if you wait until you
get 100 percent security. So security cannot be
the only way to bring peace. Peace is your
security. Not your fence or your wall is your
security. The only security that you can have is
peace. If you don’t try peace, you will never
have security.

Yalım Eralp

I agree with the Israeli Consul General when he
said “Israel acts when things related to the
national interest of Israel”. For instance, there
was no American permission in 1967. But the
question is that Israel cannot make a move on
Syria without the permission of the U.S.
because of the Iran connection.

You [Amihai] mentioned the Golan Heights
rightly and raised a security question; what if
Syria invites Iran to the Golan after Israel
withdraws from the Golan Heights. My question
is whether Muslim Brotherhood may overtake
one day Egypt and what do you do with it?
Another question is whether Israeli security
better today than five years ago? If the answer
is no, which I think it is, then is the policy
wrong?
Prof. Dr. Gencer Özcan
Lecturer, Yıldız Teknik University

At the beginning you made a list of issues that you [Alon] covered. Was it also a list of priorities? This is the first question. Second question is that you attached a great deal of importance to the Golan Park issue. I found it quite interesting and creative. Is it the only way that you made progress or is it the area that you may most progress in your dealings?

Besides these questions, I would like to raise an objection to Mr. Amihai’s remarks. He talked about the invisibility of sovereignty. Then he criticized the approach of the Golan Park. I am afraid it is not the case under the present conditions. We come across everyday aspects of the visibility of sovereignty. We are living in a world where anybody lives at the others’ mercy. Let me give you an historical example: from 1923 to 1926 we shared our sovereignty rights over Bosporus by Montreux Convention. We still do not exercise full sovereignty over the straits. We have very limited sovereignty over the obligation. The idea of sharing sovereignty should not change our minds and our hearts about living together.

Mensur Akgün

So, this was the last question and last comment. Before we conclude, I will give the floor to Alon.

Dr. Alon Liel

Golan Heights is the only real problem between Israel and Syria. We do not have a very long list of problems that we have to select. Golan Heights is the main issue of the conflict that we have to tackle.

Ambassador Eralp mentioned that unlike seven years ago, the issue of Iran has been added to the list. By the way, when we were discussing the issue from 2004 to 2006, we did not know the depth of the alliance between Syria and Iran. We did not have the intelligence during our talks. Thus, it was not a big issue in our discussion. Today, the issue of Iran is not a bilateral problem between Israel and Syria. It is a regional problem.

On the other hand, regarding the Israeli-Palestinian question, we have four mega problems; Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, borders. That is why we are saying that an Israeli-Syrian conflict is much easier to solve than the Palestinian Question. Also, you can’t ignore Syria while you are dealing with the Palestinian Question. Syria has 400,000 Palestinian refugees. So, it is a player.

Before I conclude, I want to express my compliment to the Israeli government. Ibrahim Soliman and I were in Berlin two days ago. We appeared in a hall in front of 350 people. Israeli diplomats were there. Syrians did not show up although they have registered for the event. The following day the Israeli Ambassador in Germany invited us to his residence. Today, at Istanbul Kültür University, the Israeli Consul General Mordehai Amihai is here. We see Israeli diplomats everywhere we are. Israelis want to discuss the issue, but the Syrians avoid talking about it. We understand that Syria is not a real democracy. They don’t allow them to join such events. But, they can listen to it at least. It is very sad and discouraging that we don’t have the Syrian representatives here.

Thank you.

Mensur Akgün

I would like to thank you both on behalf of Global Political Center of Istanbul Kültür University. Also, I would like to congratulate you on account of your courage and sincerity.

REPORTER
Can Yirik