

## **Israeli, Syrian representatives reach secret understandings, January 16 2007**

By Akiva Eldar, Haaretz Correspondent

In a series of secret meetings in Europe between September 2004 and July 2006, Syrians and Israelis formulated understandings for a peace agreement between Israel and Syria.

The main points of the understandings are as follows:

An agreement of principles will be signed between the two countries, and following the fulfillment of all commitments, a peace agreement will be signed.

- As part of the agreement on principles, Israel will withdraw from the Golan Heights to the lines of 4 June, 1967. The timetable for the withdrawal remained open: Syria demanded the pullout be carried out over a five-year period, while Israel asked for the withdrawal to be spread out over 15 years.
- At the buffer zone, along Lake Kinneret, a park will be set up for joint use by Israelis and Syrians. The park will cover a significant portion of the Golan Heights. Israelis will be free to access the park and their presence will not be dependent on Syrian approval.
- Israel will retain control over the use of the waters of the Jordan River and Lake Kinneret.
- The border area will be demilitarized along a 1:4 ratio (in terms of territory) in Israel's favor.
- According to the terms, Syria will also agree to end its support for Hezbollah and Hamas and will distance itself from Iran.

The document is described as a "non-paper," a document of understandings that is not signed and lacks legal standing - its nature is political. It was prepared in August 2005 and has been updated during a number of meetings in Europe.

The meetings were carried out with the knowledge of senior officials in the government of former prime minister Ariel Sharon. The last meeting took place during last summer's war in Lebanon.

Government officials received updates on the meetings via the European mediator and also through Dr. Alon Liel, a former director general at the Foreign Ministry, who took part in all the meetings.

The European mediator and the Syrian representative in the discussions held eight separate meetings with senior Syrian officials, including Vice President Farouk Shara, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, and a Syrian intelligence officer with the rank of "general."

The contacts ended after the Syrians demanded an end to meetings on an unofficial level and called for a secret meeting at the level of deputy minister, on the Syrian side, with an Israeli official at the rank of a ministry's director general, including the participation of a senior American official. Israel did not agree to this Syrian request.

The Syrian representative in the talks, Ibrahim (Abe) Suleiman, an American citizen, had visited Jerusalem and delivered a message to senior officials at the Foreign Ministry regarding the Syrian wish for an agreement with Israel. The Syrians also asked for help in improving their relations with the United States, and particularly in lifting the American embargo on Syria.

For his part, the European mediator stressed that the Syrian leadership is concerned that the

loss of petroleum revenues will lead to an economic crash in the country and could consequently undermine the stability of the Assad regime.

According to Geoffrey Aronson, an American from the Washington-based Foundation for Middle East Peace, who was involved in the talks, an agreement under American auspices would call for Syria to ensure that Hezbollah would limit itself to being solely a political party.

He also told Haaretz that Khaled Meshal, Hamas' political bureau chief, based in Damascus, would have to leave the Syrian capital.

Syria would also exercise its influence for a solution to the conflict in Iraq, through an agreement between Shi'a leader Muqtada Sadr and the Sunni leadership, and in addition, it would contribute to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the refugee problem.

Aronson said the idea of a park on the Golan Heights allows for the Syrian demand that Israel pull back to the June 4 border, on the one hand, while on the other hand, the park eliminates Israeli concerns that Syrians will have access to the water sources of Lake Kinneret.

"This was a serious and honest effort to find creative solutions to practical problems that prevented an agreement from being reached during Barak's [tenure as prime minister] and to create an atmosphere of building confidence between the two sides," he said.

It also emerged that one of the Syrian messages to Israel had to do with the ties between Damascus and Tehran. In the message, the Alawi regime - the Assad family being members of the Alawi minority - asserts that it considers itself to be an integral part of the Sunni world and that it objects to the Shi'a theocratic regime, and is particularly opposed to Iran's policy in Iraq. A senior Syrian official stressed that a peace agreement with Israel will enable Syria to distance itself from Iran.

Liel refused to divulge details about the meetings but confirmed that they had taken place. He added that meetings on an unofficial level have been a fairly common phenomenon during the past decade.

"We insisted on making the existence of meetings known to the relevant parties," Liel said. "Nonetheless, there was no official Israeli connection to the content of the talks and to the ideas that were raised during the meetings."

Prior to these meetings, Liel was involved in an effort to further secret talks between Syria and Israel with the aid of Turkish mediation - following a request for assistance President Assad had made to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

That attempt failed following Israel's refusal to hold talks on an official level - and a Syrian refusal to restrict the talks to an "academic level," similar to the framework of the talks that had preceded the Oslo accords.

There was no initial formal response from the Prime Minister's Office after the story broke early on Tuesday. But the Israel Radio quoted unnamed senior Israeli officials as stating that Israel is not holding contacts with Syria.