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# Going Solo Between Syria And Israel

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Turkish diplomats shuttling between Syrian and Israeli delegations are in a full mediation exercise. But how far can they go as 'solo'?

Barcin YÄ°NANCTurkish officials conducting indirect talks between Israel and Syria have been busy reading the memoirs of the past mediation efforts. Apparently they even got hold of some unpublished memoirs. The reason why they invest so much time and energy for the first formal negotiations for eight years between the two mutual enemies seems to be their optimism.

When it comes to Turkish diplomatic efforts on the nuclear dialogue between Tehran and the six powers, Turkish diplomats are more cautious and prefer to use the term "facilitator" instead of "mediator." They seem much more confident in their rhetoric at the end of the fourth round of the talks conducted in Istanbul between the Israeli and Syrian officials.

Memory refreshing:

The first round in May was dedicated to reach an agreement on the framework according to which talks will be conducted on four major headlines: security arrangements, territory/border issues, normalization and water problem. The second was about refreshing the memory on the past negotiations. Proxy talks started to hit a nerve on the third and fourth rounds, according to Turkish diplomats familiar with the negotiations.

Just like everybody else in Turkey, as Turkish diplomats were keeping their breath last Wednesday to hear the Constitutional Court's verdict on the closure case against the ruling Justice and Development Party, some among them were also anxiously waiting to hear from Israel, as Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was getting ready to announce his resignation. As he made public his decision, it became apparent that there will be a change in the Israeli delegation, as it is headed by one of Olmert's top aides. He will participate to the fifth round of talks in August and then Israel's new prime minister will designate the new head of delegation.

Whoever succeeds Olmert, Turkish officials are confident that the talks will continue with the same enthusiasm. Despite Olmert's critics, who argue that he was trying to divert attention from the corruption investigation by giving his green light to talks with Syria, which he ruled out in the past, Turkish side is convinced that there is a general consensus, including the defense establishment in Israel for conducting peace talks with Syrians.

The replacement of Olmert, by Kadima's new leader will however be a temporary political arrangement since the country is likely to hold early elections by 2009. Conducting peace negotiations during an electoral year can have two consequences. There could either be a setback, due to lack of political courage to commit to a peace deal based on compromises, which might cost one's political career, bringing the negotiations to a stand still. Or to the contrary, talks might get intensified, ending with a peace deal seen as an electoral victory ticket.

There is no doubt that the Turkish government is aiming high for a mediation role on most of the regional issues. Turkish diplomats shuttling between Syrian and Israeli delegations are not playing the post officers; they are in a full mediation exercise.

Is trust enough?:

Both sides trusts Turkey, says a diplomat. But I wonder whether trust is enough to be an efficient mediator, which also needs the weight to exert pressure when required. As far as the Syrians are concerned I am sure that Turkish government under any administration is in the position to exert pressure on Damascus. I have my doubts however whether the same is valid for Israel. Just recall how desperately Turkey seeks the support of the Jewish lobby when the likelihood of the recognition of Armenians' claim of genocide by U.S. Congress is increasing.

Having said that, by no means am I trying to underestimate Turkish mediation efforts between Israel and Syria. Initiating formal talks after a break of eight years, with a joint statement is an important achievement. My expectation is that at one stage it will become highly difficult to go on "solo" and that it might prove wiser to get the assistance of an another actor or actors.

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