

## U.S. Cancels Planned Meeting with Visiting Syrian Group

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The State Department reversed course and turned down a Syrian delegation's request for a meeting with Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Welch.

State Department spokesman Gonzalo Gallegos said Wednesday that Welch would not meet the delegation. Earlier, the U.S. had said that the top official would schedule a meeting if requested.

Gallegos said, "We're unable to meet with them now." He said the U.S. considers the trip, organized by a non-governmental organization, Search for Common Ground, a private visit.

"Upon review of their program, and changes in schedules, ultimately, (it) did not work out," Gallegos said.

The Syrian team groups ex-MP Ahmed al-Taqi, an advisor to the Syrian premier who manages a Damascus-based think tank; Samir Seifan, a businessman who manages a business studies center; and Samir Mobayed, a political analyst and university professor who had graduated from the American University of Beirut.

Al-Taqi said the group would meet on Thursday with members of Congress.

The meeting with Welch, if it were to take place, would have been the first between a U.S. State Department official and a Syrian team since the 2005 assassination of ex-Premier Rafik Hariri.

Israel and Syria have been holding indirect talks on a possible peace accord through Turkish intermediaries.

Reporting on Syria's views at a news conference, al-Taqi said that his country had made a "strategic" decision to pursue a land-for-peace treaty with Israel. But he said the talks would be futile if Israel did not agree to relinquish all of the Golan Heights, which it captured during the 1967 Mideast war.

"Our main condition is full land for peace," he said. "Syria would not enter into negotiations without that assurance."

Israel offered to turn over the Golan Heights to Syria in 2000 in negotiations in Washington sponsored by the Clinton administration. But the talks collapsed after Syria's demand for access to the Sea of Galilee was rejected by Israel, which relies on it for water.

Al-Taqi, speaking at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, said there were ways of solving the Sea of Galilee issue.

"Peace is our strategy of choice," he said. "And we will do it as soon as possible."(AP-Naharnet)

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