

Tzipi Livni is preparing to end talks with Syria if she becomes Israel's new prime minister

Contributed by Carolynne Wheeler in Tel Aviv, Telegraph
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The woman who is on course to become Israel's next prime minister is preparing to end fledgling peace talks with Syria unless it cuts its ties with Iran and the militant Hizbollah group.

Tzipi Livni, who is expected to win the ruling Kadima party's leadership race despite a growing challenge from her main opponent, is using the last days of her campaign before Wednesday's primary to broadcast a strong message to the Arab world.

She is determined to ensure that nobody assumes that the presence of a woman at Israel's helm might leave the country more susceptible to attack.

Ms Livni has made plain that she is likely to end the indirect talks with Syria, brokered by Turkey and made public only in May, bringing to an abrupt halt one of the few innovations of the outgoing prime minister, Ehud Olmert.

In her harshest statement yet on the matter, during a rare interview with the Al-Arabiya television network, Ms Livni said last week she has "no need to meet with Syrian representatives" as long as the country continues to allow weapons smuggling to Hizbollah in neighbouring Lebanon.

She has previously warned that in her view Syria has used the opening of talks with Israel to bolster its international standing, after years of pariah status, without showing serious intent to cut ties with either Hizbollah or Iran - both sworn and deadly enemies of Israel.

"This is a point in which we need to find out whether Syria is serious in terms of peace," she said. "In order to show that they are serious enough, they need to stop what they are doing right now, in supporting all these terrorist activities in the region."

Her harder line on Syria was a rare moment of toughness in an otherwise low-key campaign, despite the corruption controversy surrounding Mr Olmert, US pressure to reach a peace deal with the Palestinians and the threat posed by Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Ms Livni has portrayed herself as the only leader who can maintain the party's fragile government coalition and avoid early elections, while toughening her position on Syria and Iran.

She has pledged to continue talks with Palestinian leaders but cautions that rushing could lead to a breakdown and more violence. She has also promised that Israel will not hesitate to launch a military strike on Iran if sanctions fail to curb its nuclear programme.

"She is not trying to be nice, or to please anyone," said Amira Dotan, a retired general and fellow Kadima MP who shares Ms Livni's philosophy on Syria. "Courage is the ability to speak up and voice your voice, even if your voice is not bass or tenor, but soprano."

However, in the closing stages of the campaign wildly varying polls have indicated that the clear 20 point lead that Ms Livni enjoyed among party members three weeks ago may be narrowing - with some polls suggesting that her lead may have dropped slightly and one indicating a drop to about six per cent.

It has not been an easy fight against Shaul Mofaz, her nearest rival. Mr Mofaz, the transportation minister, is a former defence minister and chief of staff for the Israeli army. Two other candidates, Avi Dichter, who is minister of public security, and Meir Sheetrit, who is minister of the interior, have fallen well behind, though their influence may become crucial if the leadership primary goes to a second, runoff vote.

Mr Mofaz has cast himself as the guardian of Israel's security and openly questions whether Ms Livni is prepared for 3am telephone calls requiring quick but complex defence decisions.

But, while Mr Mofaz is said to have strong support from the party's grassroots, Ms Livni's supporters have been more vocal during this campaign.

At a Kadima meeting to toast the Jewish New Year last week, Ms Livni entered the hotel ballroom in a Tel Aviv suburb to a crush of television cameras and chants of "Tzipi Livni! Who is coming? Our next prime minister!"

Smiling, with the occasional toss of her blunt-cut hair, she moved slowly through the room, shaking hands and posing for pictures with rank-and-file members. Still, she was clearly uncomfortable with the attention and awkward in her embraces, finally cutting the show of warmth short to take her seat.

Her supporters maintain that she will reconnect Israelis with their leaders and help dispel the growing sense that all politicians are corrupt.

Yoel Hassonm also a Kadima MP, said: "When you go into the street, you feel that Tzipi Livni is a new hope."

Ms Livni and Mr Olmert are bitter rivals personally but politically see eye to eye on most fronts; the two even exchanged an awkward handshake before Mr Olmert's gave what may prove his valedictory address to Kadima loyalists last week.

On Syria, however, Ms Livni's policy is a clear departure and comes despite Mr Olmert's direct pleas to continue the indirect negotiations.

"These negotiations provide a very serious opportunity to reach peace," Mr Olmert said in an address Thursday night. "I didn't promise [Syrian] President [Bashar] Assad anything. What I said was, 'I know what you want, you know very well what I want. Let's sit down and talk about it.'"

Despite all campaign promises, Wednesday's leadership primary may come down to who shows up to vote: with a one-member, one-vote system and what some see as a suspicious 70,000 brand-new members in Kadima's first ever leadership contest, the winner may simply be the best organised candidate.

"We don't have a clue what will develop in the very short time we are left with before the vote," said Tamar Hermann, a political scientist and pollster. "I tend to believe many people who are eligible to vote in the Kadima primary have not made up their minds yet."

Still, Ms Livni's team is working hard for a first-round victory, for fear a more drawn-out campaign will only weaken Kadima and send the country into early elections. All polls suggest an early election would be easily won by Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, which has pledged to end the US-backed Palestinian peace talks in favour of joint economic projects.

"Israel needs to have a steady government. To change it every two years is not a good thing," said cabinet minister and Kadima member Gideon Ezra, who has also endorsed Ms Livni. "It's very important for her to win in the first round because it will give more power to the party, and to her."

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/2909765/Tzipi-Livni-is-preparing-to-end-talks-with-Syria-if-she-becomes-Israel's-new-prime-minister.html>