

Transcript: Syria's Walid Moallem - WSJ

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'The main crisis, the Arab-Israeli conflict, influences all other crises in the region.'

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem talked to The Wall Street Journal's Jay Solomon Monday in New York. Read an edited transcript. (See related article on U.S.-Syria talks.)

The Wall Street Journal: How do you describe your meeting Friday with Condoleezza Rice? Walid Moallem: She expressed her satisfaction with the situation moving forward in Lebanon, also about the indirect talks between Syria and Israel. She said they support these talks and they are ready to assist. I consider this good progress in the American position…The atmosphere was positive. We decided to continue this dialogue.

WSJ: Can you describe Syria's role in the Middle East?

Mr. Moallem:: Frankly speaking, we were exerting efforts and supporting the Lebanese dialogue in al-Doha [Qatar]. When they reached consensus, or agreement, we supported this immediately. We supported the elected president, Michel Suleiman. It was known to the American and Iraqi side the efforts to strengthen security on the Syrian-Iraqi border. These are the main topics that took place during the recent six months, which, in my opinion, are very important and proving that Syria is part of the solution because of its geography and history.

WSJ: How do you view Iraq's security situation?

Mr. Moallem: I admit that the security situation has improved, but it doesn't mean that Iraq has moved towards stability. There are still many issues…that stand as obstacles. One is the future of Kirkuk; the Iraq unity; building the national army; the timetable for American troop withdrawal…All of these issues are obstacles.

WSJ: Where do Israel-Syria peace talks stand?

Mr. Moallem: We had four rounds of talks, promising talks, in Istanbul. We agreed to have the fifth round, on seventh September. But because of the situation in Israel, the Israeli side asked the Turks to postpone it. We are waiting to see what the position will be of Ms. Livni's government. So are they ready to resume or not?... The most important thing is not to continue or not. But to have the will, the political will, to achieve peace based on the Madrid terms of reference and land-for-peace.

WSJ: What type of relations do you want with the next U.S. administration?

Mr. Moallem: We were passing eight years of this administration, which do not consider achieving comprehensive peace in the Middle East one of its priorities. And because the American role is important in our region, we hope that the coming administration will consider to change towards making a comprehensive peace in the Middle East one of its priorities. In the Middle East, each crisis influences the other. But the main crisis, the Arab-Israeli conflict, influences all other crises in the region.

WSJ: How is power shifting in the Middle East?

Mr. Moallem: New regional players emerged in the Middle East. When Damascus hosted the Quartet Summit -- France, Qatar, Turkey, Syria -- and they discussed and tackled issues in Lebanon, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, Darfur, the Iran nuclear file. This means that regional players, supported by an international player, are determined to find a solution through political means.

WSJ: How are Syria's relations with Lebanon changing?

Mr. Moallem: The visit of President Michel Suleiman to Damascus last month was an important visit. It was agreed to build a strong base for the future of relations between Syria and Lebanon, starting from exchanging diplomatic relations, demarcation of the borders, and security cooperation between both countries. These issues are important and build on the mutual respect for sovereignty and independence of both countries.

WSJ: How does Syria view the establishment of an international tribunal to charge those involved in the murder of Rafik

Hariri?

Mr. Moallem: We've always said that this issue is purely between Lebanon and the United Nations. Syria has nothing to do with it. It's not an issue of concern for Syria.

WSJ: What's Syria's view on Israel's attack last September on an alleged nuclear reactor?

Mr. Moallem: The American side admits they were collecting information, supplied by a third country in the Middle East... to attack this location, claiming it's a nuclear reactor, which is totally untrue. We agreed with the...IAEA. They sent their observers to this location. They took biological samples, and we are waiting for them to give us their report on the result. The important issue is that this is a military location, not a nuclear location.

At the same time, we want to tell the American side we would not repeat their experience and lies on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction before the war in Iraq. You can't be partners in an aggression against a target in a sovereign country, and you're a member of this Agency. And after destroying this target you go to the Agency and say this is a nuclear target. You should have done this before.

WSJ: How would Syrian-Israeli peace impact Damascus's relations with Iran?

Mr. Moallem: We must not put the horse behind the carriage. And I'm not going to jump to the conclusion before achieving the conclusion. And no doubt, peace between Israel and Syria is part of a comprehensive peace involving the Lebanese, the Palestinians, and Israel also. If we reach this point, it will have strategic implications for the entire Middle East. Whether we accept it or not, Iran is an important player in the region. And Iran always supported Syria's right to liberate the Golan Heights and the Palestinian people's rights. If we achieve this through peaceful means, I don't see the Iranians opposed.

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