

## U.S. to Israel: Don't sell Lebanon to Syria

Contributed by Barak Ravid, Haaretz  
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Senior U.S. State Department officials sent concerned messages to their Israeli counterparts in recent months regarding the negative effects an Israel-Syria peace deal could have on Lebanese sovereignty.

"Don't sell Lebanon to the Syrians," American officials reportedly wrote.

The diplomatic messages asked Israel to remain committed to Lebanese sovereignty at all costs, stating "Israel must not sacrifice Lebanon for the sake of peace with Syria." A senior Foreign Ministry official said the U.S. even asked Israel for "guarantees" on the matter.

However, a source in the Prime Minister's Office said yesterday "the matter is not even on the table."

Political sources in Jerusalem said the Americans' concerns stemmed from a number of recent statements made by Israeli officials in closed forums to the effect that only Syria is capable of restraining the militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Michael Herzog, Defense Minister Ehud Barak's chief of staff, was the last Israeli official to speak in such terms, saying at a Washington forum several weeks ago that "in the framework of a peace deal, Israel has to recognize Syria's unique position in Lebanon."

Some U.S. officials took that statement to be a seal of approval for renewing Syrian control over Lebanon. Herzog added that Lebanese democracy lacks a firm foundation and that the country is effectively run by Hezbollah and its allies.

Syria withdrew its 14,000 troops from Lebanon in April 2005 in the wake of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which condemned Damascus for its alleged connection to the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri in February of that year.

Several points of conflict remain between Washington and Jerusalem over the issue of Lebanon and Syria. Israeli officials believe the incoming U.S. administration will take positions similar to those of previous administrations and bolster the Lebanese government of Fouad Siniora, particularly ahead of the country's 2009 parliamentary elections.

Political sources in Jerusalem said the U.S. is placing significant pressure on Israel to complete its withdrawal from the border village of Ghajar before the Lebanese elections in order to strengthen the Siniora government.

Such sentiments were expressed by David Hale, the State Department's envoy on Lebanon and a former U.S. ambassador to Jordan, during a visit to Israel several days ago.

During meetings, Israeli officials told Hale the issue of Ghajar must be handled by the Lebanese government alone, as must violations of UN Security Council 1701, which called for Hezbollah's disarmament and the removal of paramilitary forces south of the Litani River.

Hale reportedly responded undiplomatically, saying, "Withdrawal from Ghajar is something you must do. You are not doing this for us, but implementing the demarcation of the Blue Line [Israel-Lebanon border], so don't try to use this to get points or sympathy from the United States."

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert decided several weeks ago to begin talks with UN officials over withdrawal from the village. On Sunday, UN envoy Michael Williams met with Israel Defense Forces and Foreign Ministry representatives before flying to Beirut to meet with Siniora.

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