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Israel not to give up Golan Heights for peace with Syria Israel's PM rules out land for peace with Syria



Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria in 1967 and annexed the strategic plateau in 1981 (File)

OCCUPIED JERUSALEM (Agencies)

The new Israeli government will not cede the strategic Golan Heights for the sake of peace with Syria, a senior official quoted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as telling his cabinet on Sunday, as the Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman became in charge of the "strategic dialogue" with the United States.

The announcement comes after heated debate among ministers about the wisdom of pursuing the indirect contacts with Syria via Turkey launched by the former government of Ehud Olmert.

The return of the strategic plateau seized by Israel in the 1967 war is a non-negotiable Syrian demand.

Golan Heights

"I have no intention of bringing Israeli forces down from the Golan," Netanyahu was quoted as saying. "Everything that has taken place up to this point has no relevance."

Netanyahu made similar remarks in an interview with Russian-speaking journalists last week. "Staying on the Golan Heights ensures that Israel has a strategic advantage in case of conflict with Syria," he said.

In May last year, the Olmert government announced it had launched Turkish-brokered feelers with Syria about re-launching U.S.-sponsored peace negotiations with Syria which were broken off in 2000.

Syria froze those indirect talks at the turn of the year when Israel launched a devastating offensive against the Gaza Strip, controlled since June 2007 by the Islamist Hamas movement whose exiled leader Khaled Meshaal resides in Damascus.

Debate in Israel

Resumption of talks has been a source of debate between Israel's ultra-nationalist Lieberman and center-left Defense Minister Ehud Barak.

Barak argued for the launch of full-blown peace talks with Syria alongside the negotiations with the Palestinians, which were resumed under U.S. auspices in November 2007 but have been on ice since the Gaza war.

Lieberman insisted that there is no sense in talking to Syria as long as it continues to support Hamas and Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah which fought a deadly 34-day war with Israel in 2006.

The last round of peace negotiations broke off in 2000 when Israeli balked at Syrian demands for the return of the whole of the Golan Heights, right down to the Sea of Galilee, Israel's main water source.

Turkish mediators said the Olmert government had expressed readiness to withdraw from the Syrian territory, captured in the 1967 Middle East war and annexed in 1981 in a move never recognized by the international community.

But the preliminary contacts were clouded by Israel's insistence that peace requires full normalization of relations, including an end to Syria's alliances with Israeli foes Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah.

Damascus retorted that such demands had nothing to do with the principle of the exchange of land for peace set out for Middle East talks by an international conference in Madrid in 1991.

Strategic dialogue

In the meantime, Israel's Lieberman on Sunday became in charge of the "strategic dialogue" with the United States, Netanyahu's office said.

The government voted to give Lieberman the job -- which is separate from the foreign ministry portfolio -- during its weekly meeting, it said.

Lieberman will now visit London on Tuesday for talks with his British counterpart David Miliband, following his first trip abroad last week, which took him to several European capitals.

The meeting in London is part of Israel's preparations for a first White House meeting between Netanyahu and U.S. President Barack Obama later this month, a spokesman said.

The United States and Israel have been engaged since 1999 in a "strategic dialogue" which notably covers the \$3 billion-aid that Washington sends annually to its staunch ally.

Since he was sworn in on Mar. 31, Lieberman caused unease in the international community by saying Israel was not bound by November 2007 agreement at a U.S. conference to re-launch peace talks with the Palestinians.

He has been branded a "racist" by critics over his outspoken comments against Israeli Arabs.