

Israel, Syria approach 'moment of truth'

10 JAN '96

United States pushing for breakthrough in talks

BY REUBEN LOEWY

Special to The Globe and Mail
Jerusalem

THE peaceful intentions of Syria and Israel will be put to their toughest test to date when U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher embarks on a new round of shuttle diplomacy between the two countries today.

Exploratory talks between Israel and Syria under the auspices of the U.S. administration have not yet led to a breakthrough in the quest for peace.

But, in the words of Dennis Ross, a U.S. Middle East envoy, more was achieved in six days in Maryland than had been achieved in the preceding two years.

"We come back with the feeling we have a partner that wants to reach a peace deal in 1996, that is interested in real peace," chief Israeli negotiator Uri Savir said in Washington as the Israeli delegation headed home from the last round of talks in the United States.

Having established a surprisingly relaxed rapport between the Syrian and Israeli negotiators by setting the talks in more informal surroundings (the head of the Syrian delegation even shed his tie), the United States is now pushing home its success.

Mr. Christopher's visit to the region, his 16th, is seen as crucial in defining the path ahead for talks between Israel and Syria, set to resume in an undisclosed location on Jan. 21.

Having established that Syria is sincere in its pursuit of peace, now comes the "moment of truth," as Israeli cabinet minister Yossi Beilin expressed it during a recent visit to the Golan Heights, the main object of contention between the two countries. Israel has made it clear that it is willing and prepared to give up the Heights, captured during the Six-Day War in June, 1967, in return for full peace and normal relations with Syria. But just what Syria is prepared to offer in return is still un-

known.

The principle of "land for peace" was implemented with Israel's treaty with Egypt in 1979, which led to a full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula and the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries.

But the strategic and political realities facing Israel and Syria in 1996 differ considerably.

Israel will be taking a major strategic risk if it withdraws its forces from the Heights without suitable early-warning capability and a firm Syrian commitment to peace.

With only 10 months until the next scheduled elections in Israel, the government of Prime Minister Shimon Peres hopes to go to the polls with a deal with Syria wrapped up.

That is an ambitious goal, bearing in mind the complexity of the issues at hand and the fact that, on the home front, Israel will be busy with talks on a permanent settlement with the Palestinians. (The talks start in May.)

The time factor is shared by the United States. President Bill Clinton would sorely like a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement under before the November election.

Where does this leave Syrian President Hafez Assad? He has not given any impression so far of being in a great hurry to reach a deal with Israel, yet now he sees the window of opportunity closing in his face.

Syria is eager to improve its relations with the United States, and apart from the danger of being left out in the cold while new alliances — economic, political and military — are being struck in the region, Mr. Assad will not want to be seen as the one who is holding up the Middle East peace train. Mr. Christopher is likely to press Syria for a more concrete signal to a skeptical Israel that it is willing to change course and compromise slightly.