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Assad: Direct Israel talks possible if U.S. mediates

By [Yoav Stern](#), Haaretz Correspondent

Syrian President Bashar Assad said his country could engage in direct peace negotiations with Israel if the United States acted as a mediator, according to an interview published on Wednesday.

"We need the United States to act as a mediator when we move from the current indirect negotiations to direct negotiations [with Israel]," he was quoted as saying by Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper.

Assad told the Japanese-language daily that progress in the talks would be dependent on the new government soon to take office in Israel.

He was further quoted as saying he wants to engage in dialogue for regional peace, something he has not said before, in which militant groups Hamas and Hezbollah will be involved.

Syria formally suspended the Turkish-mediated indirect talks last year during Israel's offensive against Hamas in Gaza, but Syrian officials have not ruled out their resumption, even if a right-wing government is formed in Israel.

The Syrian president's interview with the Japanese paper came as *Haaretz* reported that Prime Minister-designate [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) sent a message to Syria before last month's election promising that a government under him would "not provoke war" and would be interested in "seriously and genuinely exploring" a peace process.

Likud officials met with senior Syrian figures in January in Washington to prepare the ground for further exchanges after Israel's next government takes office, Likud sources said.

Assad, meanwhile, was set to hold talks on Wednesday with Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah in Riyadh, in the clearest sign of a thaw in ties between two Arab countries that have been at odds over regional issues.

The two leaders were due to discuss "ways to bolster bilateral ties, as well as regional and international issues of common interest," Saudi state news agency SPA said.

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