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## US congressman: 'Assad won't accept a Jewish state'

By Herb Keinon

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JERUSALEM (January 18) - Syrian President Bashar Assad has yet to reconcile himself to the existence of a Jewish state, according to Henry Waxman, a California congressman who met him earlier this week.

Waxman's comments came amid conflicting reports on whether or not Assad has signaled he is interested in renewing peace talks, and if so, from what point to begin.

"My clear reading of Assad is that he has said he is for land for peace, but his position is no different than his father's position - it has to be all of the land, and it is of course not clear what kind of peace Israel will get," Waxman, on a regional tour along with four other congressmen, told a Jerusalem press conference yesterday.

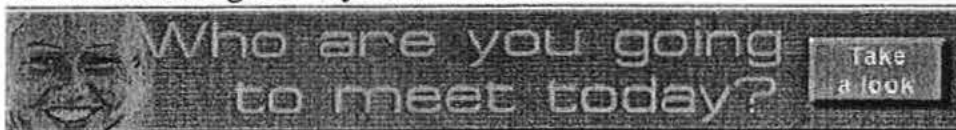
When he pressed Assad on whether he can be reconciled with a Jewish state, he said, in light of the anti-Semitic comments the Syrian president made when the pope visited Damascus last year, "he would not say that he could recognize a Jewish country. When I pressed him, he said why does it have to be a Jewish country, Jews, Moslems, Christians can live together."

House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt - when asked if his impression after visiting Syria was that Assad would like to resume talks without any preconditions, or if he insists on picking up where the talks collapsed two years ago - said,

"I don't think things have changed a lot. I think they are where they have been. They [the Syrians] do have some conditions about how this [the negotiations] would come about."

Gephardt said the delegation's talks in Syria focused on the existence of terrorist organizations and terrorist training bases there. "We want their cooperation more than we have had it," Gephardt said. "We appreciate the cooperation we have had, but want more in the fight against terrorism. There has to be a recognition in this part of the world that Israel has a right to exist in peace and stability."

Israel wants to renew negotiations with Syria "without any preconditions based on UN resolutions 242 and 338," Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said this week, after a meeting with visiting Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique. One senior official in the Prime Minister's Office dismissed talk of feelers emanating from Syria as "not serious."



noted, outsiders could not readily evaluate their product.

The congressman asked for (1) a list of everyone who took part in the energy meetings. He wanted (2) to know the dates each had attended, (3) on what subjects they were consulted and (4) who had favored or opposed some of the more controversial recommendations the administration was putting forward as government policy.

In short, Mr. Vice President, what went on behind closed doors?

Dick Cheney is no neophyte. He too was once a congressman, though not for nearly so long as Waxman. But his curriculum vitae includes some even more prestigious jobs - White House chief of staff, secretary of Defense and now vice president. Could some pipsqueak up on Capitol Hill expect to push this guy around?

The response to Waxman might have intimidated a lesser man. Cheney lay claim to support of the Founding Fathers, citing the constitutional separation of powers and asserting the "executive privilege" any administration feels it must enjoy to consult whom it pleases - when, where and without kibitzers.

The message was clear: Congressman, you're barking up the wrong tree.

In a second letter, Waxman denied he intended a constitutional affront. But he questioned whether public policy can properly be established, or Congress can legislate without access to the sort of information he sought.

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 diverted national attention, momentarily muting the dispute over energy policy. It was unexpectedly revived by events surrounding the collapse of Enron.

Kenneth Lay's corporate piggy bank is known to have had prodigious input into the energy powwows. Embarrassing for Cheney, several paragraphs in his final policy draft seem lifted intact from Enron proposals. Equally troubling, environmental leaders say they were not consulted until near the end of those meetings.

Once again, Henry Waxman felt in a letter-writing mood. Only this time he bypassed Cheney, addressing instead the General Accounting Office. He asked this nonpartisan congressional watchdog agency for help in cracking the vice president's wall of silence.

Things have since moved swiftly. The GAO asked Cheney to produce the same information Waxman wanted. Cheney responded as resolutely as before - and told reporters, "Let them sue me."

Precisely what GAO now intends doing. A court test seems likely to determine the validity and extent of executive privilege.

Such confrontations in the past usually have turned on a president's war powers. The most recent run-in, however, was occasioned by President Nixon's refusal to surrender audiotapes to Watergate probers until the U.S. Supreme Court compelled it.

With or without a court ruling, it's believed Cheney will eventually feel pressured to provide the information he has been asked for.

In which case Waxman might have one more question. Would the veep prefer his crow on white or rye?