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The Specter Shuttle

Pa. lawmaker serves as Mideast go-between

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Arlen Specter has a good rapport with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The U.S. senator also has a good relationship with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad.

Now if he could only get Netanyahu and Assad to talk to *each other*...

That was Specter's wish after returning from another of his shuttle-diplomacy missions to the Middle East last week.

The Pennsylvania Republican said in a phone interview Monday that breaking the stalemate between Israel and Syria might require that President Clinton invite both leaders to the White House to meet face to face.

"I think he ought to call them to the Oval Office," Specter said. "The president has been involved [in the region], to his credit."

Although Assad "is disinclined" to come to the United States, the Syrian "would find it hard to turn down" a bid

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from Washington, the lawmaker speculated.

He said it would be good for Assad, who has never visited the United States, to see the freedoms and material wealth in this country.

Specter said he would like the Syrian leader to see the Court and Plaza at King of Prussia.

The Pennsylvania senator said he has met with Assad on a number of occasions.

"We have a very good rapport. I am constantly urging him to meet with the Israeli prime minister," Specter said, adding that these nudges date back to the period when Yitzhak Shamir was Israel's prime minister.

"It's odd that I can meet with Assad [but Israeli leaders] can't. There's still a lot of recrimination and enmity," the former Philadelphia district attorney said.

Specter explained that this round of shuttle diplomacy was a follow-up to a similar mission he made in the summer. At that time, Netanyahu asked him to deliver a message to Assad.

This time, Specter was attending an assembly in Paris when both sides asked him to serve as an intermediary.

Specter said there were other issues he pursued with Assad as well.

"We have some pretty tough discussions," Specter said. Among the other issues he raised with the Syrian leader were the attack on the American military housing complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, earlier this

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year.

There was also the question of why Achmed Jabril, head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine terrorist organization, is allowed to be based in Damascus.

Assad reportedly asked Specter, "Where do you want him to go?"

As for Syria's intentions regarding Lebanon, Specter said Assad is "not anxious" to resolve the situation there. Syria has occupied its neighbor for many years, and it reportedly controls terrorist activity emanating from Lebanon.

Specter said he doubts that Syria will attack Israel over the Golan Heights. Syrian officials have stated that if Israel does not peacefully return the land it captured while driving back a Syrian attack, Syria will retake it by force.

"The first thing Netanyahu asked me to convey is that [Israelis] were interested in peace," Specter reported. He added that to Syria, Netanyahu is still an unknown quality.

In Israel, "there is a lot of concern" about Syrian troop build up near the Golan, as well as about new Syrian missile systems and chemical warfare capabilities that Syria has.

Potent deterrents

But Specter said he doubts Syria will use any of this weaponry. He said Assad fears Israel's nuclear arsenal and the fact that the Jewish state is backed by the United States.

Specter said it is important for members of Congress to visit the Middle East — going beyond the popular destinations such as



Sen. Arlen Specter

RNS Photo/Reuters

Jerusalem and Cairo — to get a feel for the region.

With all of Specter's experience on diplomatic missions and with speculation that Clinton might appoint a Republican to his cabinet, Specter — who sits on the Senate Intelligence Committee — might seem a natural fit as secretary of state.

But Specter said he is not interested in heading the State Department.

"The minimum number of people I'm willing to work for is 12 million," he quipped, noting that he does not want the president to be his boss, but rather the citizens of Pennsylvania.

Specter said he favors Richard Holbrooke, U.S. special envoy to Bosnia, for the post.

"I have been impressed with Holbrooke. I had very sharp exchanges with him on Bosnia. I was impressed with his aggressiveness. I would like to see an aggressive foreign policy," Specter said. ■