

European parliament chief: EU ready to broker Israel-Syria talks

The European parliament chief said Thursday that the EU is prepared to broker Israel-Syria peace talks.

Visiting Lebanon, Hans-Gert Pottering says European officials are ready to be involved as honest brokers whenever it is felt to be appropriate. Pottering held talks Thursday with Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, Prime Minister Fuad Siniora and other Lebanese officials. On Friday he will travel to south Lebanon to meet with United Nations peacekeeping troops on the ground.

Syria and Israel have held several rounds of indirect peace talks recently through Turkish mediators.

Meanwhile, a senior Syrian official said on Wednesday the indirect negotiations have made progress but not enough to move to face-to-face talks as favored by Israel.

"If the talks had not progressed then they would have been stopped," said Buthaina Shaaban, who was recently promoted from expatriates minister to adviser to President Bashar al-Assad.

Shaaban would not be drawn on what was discussed in four rounds of talks held in Turkey since May. She said the talks will continue despite the impending resignation of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

"We are not concerned with whether Olmert resigns or not. We are not a party to internal Israeli issues," Shaaban told reporters.

Diplomats in the Syrian capital said the Turkish-mediated talks have mostly covered old ground tackled in previous negotiations between Syria and Israel in the 1990s.