



## **Our World: Our friends the Syrians**

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Just ahead of Sunday's Duma elections, Russian President Vladimir Putin took yet another step towards ending the post-Cold War thaw in Russia's relations with the West by signing a law suspending Russia's participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. Starting next week, Russia will halt NATO countries' inspections and verifications of its military sites and will no longer be obligated to limit the number of its conventional weapons deployed west of the Urals. The signal the move sends former Soviet republics and satellites like Ukraine, Georgia, Poland and Rumania is a chilling one.

Russia's hostility towards the West extends from Europe to the Middle East. During Israel's war with Hizbullah in 2006, Russian military advisors in Syria provided real-time

intelligence to both Syria and Hizbullah. Hizbullah's missiles were transferred to the terrorist organization in their original packing from Syria's Ministry of Defense after they arrived from Russia. Since the war, Russia has sold massive amounts of advanced arms to both Syria and Iran. Russian arms continue to comprise the bulwark of Hizbullah's newly replenished missile stocks.

Diplomatically, Russia has acted as Syria's and Iran's shield in the UN Security Council and other international forums. It has placed obstacles on the UN investigation of the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. It has prevented the Security Council from taking any consequential actions against Iran's nuclear weapons program. And it has continued its

sponsorship of Iran's nuclear program by maintaining its involvement at the Bushehr nuclear reactor which it built. Just this week, the pro-Iranian IAEA approved Russia's plan to ship nuclear fuel to Bushehr.

In the midst of all of this, in their wisdom, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his government have decided to accept Russia as the lead mediator in negotiations between Israel and Syria towards an Israeli surrender of the strategically vital Golan Heights.

According to reports in Ma'ariv, Olmert has been conducting secret talks with Assad regarding an Israeli retreat from the Golan Heights through Deputy Russian Foreign Minister Alexander Sultanov. At the Annapolis conference last week, those talks - and Russia's central role in promoting them - were brought into the open.

Olmert agreed to Israeli participation in a Russian remake of Annapolis in Moscow in January. There, Syria's demand for an Israeli surrender of the Golan Heights will take center stage.

According to the Ma'ariv report, Israeli officials are enthusiastic about Russia's lead role in the talks. While Syria is suspicious of the US, it trusts and respects its Russian defender Putin. By Olmert's lights, this is a good thing.

Russia's hostility towards the US and Israel and close ties to Israel's primary enemies Syria and Iran make Israel's enthusiastic embrace

of Russian mediation with Syria difficult to stomach. Sickening or not, it would make sense if in exchange for Israeli legitimacy, Moscow were to mitigate its bad behavior. But there have been no signs that this has occurred.

Ma'ariv claimed that Olmert's sudden visit to the Kremlin last month was a consequence of developments in Sultanov's shuttle diplomacy.

Perhaps this is true. But coming as it did immediately after Putin returned from his state visit to Iran, where he restated his support for Iran's development of nuclear technology and pledged to complete the Bushehr reactor, Olmert's visit was perceived as an Israeli acceptance of Russia's support for Iran.

There is the off chance that the officials who spoke with Ma'ariv are correct. Perhaps under Russian mediation the Syrians will be more willing to agree to sign an agreement with Israel in which Israel commits itself to handing the Golan Heights over to Damascus than it would be under American mediation. But such an agreement would be a strategic disaster for Israel.

Given the anti-democratic nature of the Russian and the Syrian regimes, it is clear that such an agreement would not include any strong provision for Syrian political liberalization. And since only a liberalization of Syrian politics could cause Damascus to abandon its support for jihad, its strategic alliance with Iran and its development of weapons of mass destruction, it is clear that an

accord with Israel would not lead to a decrease in Syrian bellicosity.

Syria's abiding hostility makes the notion of an Israeli surrender of the Golan Heights strategically indefensible. Without the Golan, all of northern Israel would be exposed to Syrian forces. And those forces are vastly more powerful today than they were before 1967 when they made life for the Israeli communities beneath the strategic plateau unbearable. Indeed, given Syria's advanced Russian arsenal, it would be all but impossible for Israel to reconquer the Golan Heights and so win a future war.

In the meantime, simply by conducting Russian-mediated negotiations with Syria, the Olmert government is conferring undeserved legitimacy on both Damascus and Moscow. By extension, the government is eroding Israel's regional posture still further.

The Olmert government isn't alone in its embrace of Damascus. The Bush administration is following a pro-Syrian policy of its own, with similarly disastrous results.

Speaking to the New York Times of the administration's decision to invite Syria to last week's Annapolis conference, a senior administration official argued, "Look, a handful in the Arab League were saying they could not attend the conference unless Syria was put on the agenda. So we put Syria on the agenda. What did it cost us? Nothing."

Although perhaps no actual money changed hands, to say that the US paid no price for its decision to invite Syria to participate in the conference is to ignore reality. What Syrian participation at Annapolis cost the US was Lebanon.

Immediately after the conference, the anti-Syrian majority in the Lebanese parliament agreed to support Syria's candidate, General Michel Suleiman as the next Lebanese president to replace Syrian agent, former president Emil Lahoud. As Talal Atrissi, a political analyst at Lebanese University told the Times, "The Syrians did not want to go to Annapolis and without them the conference would have been a failure.... The Syrians traded their participation, which did not cost them anything, with a deal on the Lebanese presidency."

As Lee Smith reported in the *Weekly Standard*, Lebanon's anti-Syrian forces interpreted the US decision to invite the Syrians to Annapolis as an American abandonment of Lebanese democracy. In October, the leader of the anti-Syrian coalition Saad Hariri visited Washington. As Smith notes, after meeting with President George W. Bush and Congressional leaders, Hariri told reporters, "There is a killing machine in Syria. We came to Washington to say, 'If you are going to do something about it, let us know. If you are not going to do anything about it, let us know. But no matter what, we're not going to give in.'"

By inviting Syria to Annapolis, the Americans told the anti-Syrian for-

ces in Lebanon all they needed to know. Bowing to the reality of America's abandonment, they gave in and announced their support for Suleiman.

Suleiman's ascension to the Lebanese presidency is disastrous to the US for two reasons. First, it destroys US credibility as an ally. Between Rice's decision to put the squeeze on Israel for massive concessions to the terror-supporting Palestinians, to her lackadaisical attitude to Russia's abuse of US allies in Ukraine and Poland, to her abandonment of Japan in favor of appeasing North Korea, to her neglect of pro-US political forces in Iraq, Rice's preference for Syria over Lebanese democrats makes it clear that there is no advantage to be gained from being pro-American.

Furthermore, as the September 11 attacks showed, when states are brought under terrorist control they constitute clear and present dangers not just to their region, but to the world. Under the Taliban regime, forces in the land-locked Afghan

backwater successfully planned attacks on America.

The lethal force of a terror-ruled Lebanon, situated strategically on the Mediterranean coast presents an even greater threat to US national security. This is all the more apparent given that recently indicted Hizbullah agent Nada Nadim Prouty successfully infiltrated both the FBI and the CIA, and the well-known fact that Hizbullah fields agents throughout the US and Canada.

As far as Olmert and Rice are concerned, perhaps their embrace of Syria really is a no-cost move. Olmert insulates himself still further from his critics by strengthening his position with the leftist, appeasement-crazed Israeli media. Rice got her picture taken with Arab potentates at Annapolis.

But while their embraces of Syria may put them ahead politically, there is no doubt that their gains come at the expense of the security of the Israeli, Lebanese and American people.