



Congressional Testimony: AFPC Vice President Ilan Berman | The Russian-Syrian Connection: Thwarting Democracy In The Middle East | U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Middle East; Russia

On March 9, 2005, AFPC Vice President Ilan Berman testified before the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe on the topic of "The Russian-Syrian Connection: Thwarting Democracy In The Middle East And The Greater OSCE Region." Below is his written statement. A full transcript of the hearing is available via the CSCE's website.

Chairman Brownback, distinguished members of the Commission: It is an honor to appear before you today to address the subject of Russian-Syrian strategic cooperation. My name is Ilan Berman, and I am Vice President for Policy of the American Foreign Policy Council.

This hearing comes at a pivotal time in Syria's foreign policy. The U.S.-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the political transformation that has since begun in Iraq has profoundly threatened the stability of the Syrian regime.

Moreover, since the passage of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1559 in September 2004, the government of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has faced mounting international pressure over its nearly three-decade-long occupation of Lebanon.

These strategic challenges have led the Syrian regime to expand its contacts with the Russian government. This growing proximity was demonstrated publicly in January 2005, when Assad embarked upon a diplomatic visit to Moscow. His trip was a major success, yielding a mutual commitment to closer cooperation between the Russian government and its "most important partner" in the Middle East. The Moscow meeting between Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin also had several tangible outcomes: As part of its public re-engagement with Syria, the Kremlin agreed to write off almost three-quarters (73 percent) of Syria's \$13.4 billion Cold War era debt.(1)

As a result, according to Syrian officials, foreign debt has now been cut to "less than 10 percent" of Syria's roughly \$58 billion GDP.(2) This arrangement has serious implications. The Syrian military remains overwhelmingly reliant on Soviet- and Russian-origin weaponry, which make up an estimated 90 percent of its arsenal.(3) Therefore any Syrian military modernization effort inevitably revolves around cooperation with Russia. Such a program has long been contemplated by the Syrian government, and is now much more likely, thanks to the Kremlin.

Russia and Syria signed six supplemental agreements on economic cooperation, including an accord designed to strengthen energy coordination between the two countries.(4) This deal involves increased contacts between Russia's Soyuzneftegaz conglomerate and Syria's Oil and Natural Resources Ministry, and sets the stage for greater Russian investment in the Syrian energy sector. Such involvement is critically important for Syria's long-term solvency. Approximately half of the country's total annual export revenues currently derive from oil sales.(5) Moreover, the investment base in Syria's energy sector is shrinking. Since mid-2002, international pressure has led two supermajors, U.S.-based ConocoPhillips and France's TotalFinaElf, to announce their disengagement from Syria.(6) Russian energy conglomerates are therefore positioned to play an increasingly decisive role in propping up the Syrian regime.

As part of the expanding military-technical cooperation between the two countries, Russia has committed to upgrading Syria's air defense infrastructure. Russian and Syrian officials have commenced talks about the Assad regime's acquisition of the "Strelets" mobile air defense system.(7) Additionally, Syrian officials are said to be interested in Russia's advanced S-400 air- and missile defense system.(8) Through its provision of these defenses, as well as potential sales of other technologies – such as the "Iskander E" short-range missile – Russia is assisting in the creation of what amounts to a strategic "umbrella" over Syria.(9)

What drives Syrian policy? One factor is certainly leadership. Syria's current ruler is an ophthalmologist by training. Until his sudden death in January 1994, it was his older brother, Basil, who had been Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad's heir-apparent. As a result, until shortly before his assumption of power in June 2000, Bashar had had little exposure to affairs of state.

In perspective, this means that Syria's president has been a foreign policy practitioner for less time than the current crop of graduate political science students now completing studies at American universities. This is perhaps the reason that, under his direction, Syria has been pursuing a haphazard and at times even schizophrenic foreign policy – ranging from sporadic intelligence assistance to the United States to expanded partnership with the Hezbollah terrorist organization to harboring elements of Palestinian radical groups and high-level Iraqi Ba'ath loyalists.⁽¹⁰⁾

Another element is threat perception. As a result of its Ba'athist credentials, as well as its role as a major state sponsor of terrorism, Syria understandably sees itself as a possible candidate for U.S.-assisted regime change, and is working actively to prevent such an eventuality.

Syria's turn to Russia is only one part of this effort. Over the past year, Syria has also signed new agreements with Iran codifying closer military cooperation between Damascus and Tehran and enshrining an Iranian commitment to defend Syria in the event of an American or Israeli offensive.⁽¹¹⁾

Russia's role is driven by different considerations. Under the guidance of President Putin, Russia increasingly has begun to revert to a geo-political, neo-imperialist strategic agenda. Kremlin officials have set their sights on the post-Saddam Hussein Middle East, and have begun efforts to reestablish a regional role at the expense of American strategy. Cooperation with Damascus constitutes a large part of these plans. As a recent analysis in Moscow's independent Kommersant newspaper explained:

"Russian foreign policy ambitions long ago reached Soviet proportions. However, in reality, up to now Moscow has not been in a position to lay claim to superpower status. On the contrary, a series of failures on the international scene have shown the real state of affairs. Nevertheless... [u]sing the Syrian government's fear of a possible American invasion, Moscow is calculating on binding Damascus to its own military industrial complex following the example of Soviet times."⁽¹²⁾

Russia's collusion with the Syrian regime has regional implications. Since the February 14th assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in Beirut, Syria has been weathering a sudden and unprecedented challenge to its traditional role as Lebanon's overlord. Moreover, signs that Lebanon's "Cedar Revolution" could spark internal change within the Syrian regime are also beginning to emerge.⁽¹³⁾

Assistance from Moscow, in the form of economic incentives or new military sales, constitutes a major lifeline – one that will provide the Syrian government with greater resources and capabilities to resist pro-independence stirrings in Lebanon or within its own country.

Notably, some encouraging signs are visible. In the past week, Russian officials have echoed their counterparts in the United States, Saudi Arabia and Europe in publicly calling for a complete Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon.⁽¹⁴⁾ Moreover, Kremlin officials have been cautiously supportive of the recent signs of political transformation emerging from Lebanon.⁽¹⁵⁾

So far, however, this rhetoric has not been matched by a rollback of strategic ties between Moscow and Damascus. For all practical purposes, therefore, the Kremlin's partnership with the Assad regime continues to constitute a major impediment to the progress of democracy in the Middle East.

ENDNOTES

(1) Riad Kahwaji, "Russia, Syria Revive Ties with Debt Reduction," Defense News, January 31, 2005.

(2) "Syrian Foreign Debt Cut to 10 Percent of GDP After Russia Deal," Agence France Presse, January 27, 2005.

(3) Simon Saradzhyan, "Countries Race for Russian Weapons," St. Petersburg Times (Russia) No. 481, July 9, 1999.

(4) "Russia and Syria Agree on Debt," Russia Journal, January 26, 2005.

(5) Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy, "Country Analysis Brief: Syria," April 2004, <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/syria.html>.

(6) Paul Michael Wihbey, "Syria's Weak Spot," National Review Online, March 3, 2005.

(7) Marina Golovkina, "Russia to sell Advanced missiles to Syria," Reuters, February 16, 2005.

(8) "Syria's Assad Negotiated for S-400 Anti-Missile System in Moscow," Geostrategy-Direct, February 21, 2005.

(9) "Superpower Optimism," Kommersant (Moscow), January 24, 2005.

(10) See, for example, Editorial, "Warning to Damascus," Wall Street Journal, February 7, 2005.

(11) "Defence Minister Says Syria a Part of Iran's Security," IRNA (Tehran), February 26, 2004; "Syria Part of Iran's Security: Shamkhani," Tehran Times, February 28, 2004; "Iran, Syria Form Common Front," BBC, February 16, 2005.

(12) "Superpower Optimism," Kommersant (Moscow), January 24, 2005.

(13) See, for example, Amir Taheri, "Syria's Road to Freedom," New York Post, March 7, 2005; Marc Ginsburg, "The Road From Damascus," Weekly Standard 010, Iss. 24, March 14, 2005.

(14) "Russia Urges Syria to Leave Lebanon," United Press International, March 3, 2005.

(15) "Russia Firmly Supports Lebanon Independence," Xinhua (Beijing), March 1, 2005.