

**The Russian-Syrian Connection: Thwarting Democracy in the Middle East and the Greater OSCE Region**

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226 Dirksen Senate Office Building

**Statement for the record of Prof. Walid Phares,  
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Mr Chairman, Mr Ranking member, members of the United States Helsinki Commission.

I am pleased to participate in this timely hearing on the subject of Russian involvement with Syria. I shall focus my remarks upon the impact of Russian-Syrian relations on Lebanon. I am a professor of international relations, an expert on terrorism and am originally from Lebanon. I am the Secretary-General of the World Lebanese Cultural Union, and in that capacity I have just been in New York where I met seven ambassadors to the UN Security Council (Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, France, Greece, Russia, US) and the Deputy Secretary General for Middle Eastern affairs. While I am not an international lawyer, I shall draw your attention to international legal standards which I sincerely believe Russia is not meeting.

As you know, the present turmoil in Lebanon stems from the assassination of the former prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, on February 14, 2005. Mr Hariri's murder was, however, not a bolt from the blue. Rather, his brutal removal from the political scene followed months of threats by Syria and its proxies against Lebanese who have sought the end of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon in compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1559 of September 2, 2004 (UNSCR 1559/2004). The US Congress was ahead of the international community in demanding such a withdrawal through the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003.

Throughout the increasing tensions in Lebanon, Russia has stood firmly with its traditional ally in Damascus. It is clear to me that Russian influence over Syria will play a significant role in the fortunes of democracy in Lebanon and the Middle East region.

By supplying arms and diplomatic support, Russia sustains the Syrian government and the continued Syrian presence in Lebanon which is in violation of UNSCR 1559/2004. Russian arms are used to violate human rights in both Syria and Lebanon. These same Russian arms are supplied to terrorists and insurgents who attack US forces and Iraqi civilians in Iraq and who conduct terrorist operations against Israeli civilians.

As you know, the Soviet Union had a long history of support, economic, financial and military, for Syria and for Syrian-aligned terrorist groups. Russia has continued the military relationship since the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, albeit on a reduced scale.

Syria depends on Russia for the supply, maintenance and spare parts for all of its major weapons systems. Although there is some indigenous manufacture of armaments, this is neither of the scale nor quality that would allow Syria to claim to have an independent arms industry.

Russian military supplies are the foundation upon which the Syrian state is built. As you know, Syria is the last remaining Ba'athist dictatorship and its sole means of influence is armed force and intimidation.

Russia, and its predecessor the Soviet Union, have supplied Syria with the following armaments that play a role in Syrian power projection: surface to air missiles, surface to surface missiles, tanks and armored personnel carriers, small arms.

The surface to air missiles allow Syria to attempt to compensate for the weakness of its air force and to provide an air defense umbrella stretching beyond Syria's borders.

The surface to surface missiles allow Syria to threaten its neighbors' cities, as Iraq's long range missiles did under Saddam Hussein's regime. In addition, the suspicion that Syria has active chemical and biological weapons programs raises the concern that such missiles may be armed with non-conventional warheads.

The tanks and armored personnel carriers, along with the small arms, are the standard weapons of Ba'athist repression at both home and abroad. Small arms, in particular, have ended up in the hands of the various Syrian-aligned terrorist groups that have plagued the Middle East. For example, the large stock of arms made available to Hizbullah by Syria and Iran contains significant quantities of Russian made weapons and weapons of Russian origin made under license abroad. The same applies to the arms that Syria has passed on to other Syrian-aligned militias and terrorist groups in Lebanon such as the Syrian Ba'ath Party, the Syrian National-Social Party and the Palestinian Saika units.

Russia appears to place no conditions on the use of arms that it supplies to foreign governments, unlike the US, and appears to show no interest in the fact that its weapons have become the killing instruments of choice of terrorists and insurgents around the world. Indeed, according to a 2003 report by Amnesty International and Oxfam International, Kalashnikovs are "up to 80 per cent" of the world's assault rifles.<sup>1</sup>

The indirect provision of arms to terrorists by Russia is particularly worrying as it violates the spirit and letter of the OSCE Charter on Preventing and Combating Terrorism,<sup>2</sup> to which Russia is a signatory and which this commission is charged with overseeing the implementation of. The OSCE Charter on terrorism states clearly at paragraph 8 that "every State is obliged to refrain from harbouring terrorists, organizing, instigating, providing active *or passive support* or assistance to, or otherwise sponsoring terrorist acts in another State, or acquiescing in organized activities within its territory directed towards the commission of such acts" (emphasis added). Indeed, paragraph 20 of the same document speaks of "the need to address conditions that may foster and sustain terrorism, in particular by fully respecting democracy and the rule of law, by allowing all

citizens to participate fully in political life”—Russia, by facilitating the continued Syrian occupation of Lebanon, is stifling democracy, the rule of law and participation in political life.

Moreover, Russian arms sales to Syria appear to contravene, in both spirit and letter, the provisions of the OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons, in particular nine of the eleven grounds listed for a state not to grant an arms export license under the proposed common export criteria.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, there is a hidden dimension to the Russian-Syrian relationship that receives insufficient attention—intelligence cooperation. Syrian intelligence officers have often been trained in Russia and the two countries appear to maintain a close intelligence relationship. A key aspect of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon is the widespread presence of Syrian intelligence officers, men who conduct their own operations while simultaneously controlling the Lebanese security services.

While it has been widely reported that Russia called on March 3, 2005 for Syria to withdraw from Lebanon, it is my belief that Russia's stance remains broadly supportive of Damascus. Remember that Russia abstained during the passage of UNSCR 1559/2004. Indeed, the Russian UN delegation stated after the adoption of UNSCR 1559/2004 that it had “tabled amendments, the purpose of which was [sic] to move the draft towards the context of a Middle East settlement as a whole and to prevent the document from being one-sided and from concentrating solely on domestic Lebanese affairs”, put otherwise, Russia sought to water down UNSCR 1559/2004 and to weaken the clear implication of the resolution that Syria is occupying Lebanon in defiance of the will of its people and international opinion.

Indeed, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said on March 4, 2005 after meeting with Walid Muallem, the Syrian first deputy foreign minister, said that Russia was “satisfied that the Syrian side, with due regard to all the circumstances and UNSCR 1559, is planning to carry out steps that we understand will soon be announced and which will go in the mainstream of the Taif Agreements and with respect for UNSCR 1559.” Lavrov also criticized “the unhealthy atmosphere which being whipped up around Syria.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, just yesterday, the Russian ambassador to the UN told me that his country would put pressure on Syria to quit Lebanon and to comply with UNSCR 1559/2004.

These are not encouraging remarks from the foreign minister of the country that arms and so sustains the Syrian regime. Indeed, the entire Russian policy towards Syria is particularly troubling given Russia's own problem with terrorism. The Russian people have suffered grievously from terrorism, yet their government seems to be unable to reach the same conclusion as the US, that terrorism is never acceptable.

Members of the United States Helsinki Commission, there will be no stability and democracy in Lebanon, nor peace in the Middle East, unless and until Russia stops supporting the Syrian regime. We all know that ending the supply of arms, curbing diplomatic support and intelligence cooperation will not on its own end the Syrian

occupation of Lebanon nor the flow of arms to terrorists. We all know, however, that no progress can be made on any of these issues while that Russian support for Syria, support in contradiction with OSCE principles and agreements, continues unabated.

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<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International and Oxfam International, *Shattered Lives: the case for tough international arms control*, London 2003, page 19, "The Kalashnikov is the godfather of assault rifles. Total production is estimated to be between 70 and 100 million, comprising up to 80 per cent of the total number of assault rifles in the world." For comparison, M-16 production was 7 million. Available at [http://www.controlarms.org/documents/arms\\_report\\_full.pdf](http://www.controlarms.org/documents/arms_report_full.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Ministerial Council Annex 1, "OSCE CHARTER ON PREVENTING AND COMBATING TERRORISM", December 7, 2002, Porto, available at [http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2002/12/1488\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2002/12/1488_en.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, FORUM FOR SECURITY CO-OPERATION, "OSCE DOCUMENT ON SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS", Vienna, November 24, 2000, available at <http://www.osce.org/docs/english/fsc/2000/decisions/fscw231.htm>. SECTION III: (A) 2. states in part (b) that "Each participating State will avoid issuing licences for exports where it deems that there is a clear risk that the small arms in question might: ... (i) Be used for the violation or suppression of human rights and fundamental freedoms; (ii) Threaten the national security of other States; (iii) Be diverted to territories whose external relations are the internationally acknowledged responsibility of another State; (iv) Contravene its international commitments, in particular in relation to sanctions adopted by the Security Council of the United Nations, decisions taken by the OSCE, agreements on non-proliferation, small arms, or other arms control and disarmament agreements; (v) Prolong or aggravate an existing armed conflict, taking into account the legitimate requirement for self-defence, or threaten compliance with international law governing the conduct of armed conflict; (vi) Endanger peace, create an excessive and destabilizing accumulation of small arms, or otherwise contribute to regional instability; (vii) Be either re-sold (or otherwise diverted) within the recipient country or re-exported for purposes contrary to the aims of this document; (viii) Be used for the purpose of repression; (ix) Support or encourage terrorism; (x) Facilitate organized crime; (xi) Be used other than for the legitimate defence and security needs of the recipient country." Russia appears to fail to observe all but stipulations (iii) and (iv).

<sup>4</sup> MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, INFORMATION AND PRESS DEPARTMENT, "Transcript of Remarks and Replies to Media Questions by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov at Press Conference Following Talks with First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Syria Walid Muallem, Moscow, March 4, 2005", available at [http://www.in.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/efcc872025942e0fc3256fbb0039ca0c?OpenDocument](http://www.in.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/efcc872025942e0fc3256fbb0039ca0c?OpenDocument).