

Column One: As the storm of war approaches

Caroline Glick , THE JERUSALEM POST

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The clouds of the coming war are converging upon Israel. But our political and military leaders refuse to look up at the darkening sky.

The Russian bear has awakened after 15 years of hibernation. Under the leadership of former KGB commander President Vladimir Putin, Russia is reasserting its traditional hostility towards Israel.

On Tuesday, Russian military engineers landed in Beirut. Their arrival signaled the first time that Russian forces have openly deployed in the Middle East. In the past Soviet forces in Syria and Egypt operated under the official cover of "military advisers." Today those "advisers" are "engineers." The Russian forces, which will officially number some 550 troops, are tasked with rebuilding a number of bridges that the IDF destroyed during the recent war. They will operate outside the command of UNIFIL.

Mosnews news service reported on Wednesday that the engineers will be protected by commando platoons from Russia's 42nd motorized rifle division permanently deployed in Chechnya. According to the report, these commando platoons are part of the Vostok and Zapad Battalions, both of which are commanded by Muslim officers who report directly to the main intelligence department of the Russian Army's General Staff in Moscow. The Vostok Battalion is commanded by Maj. Sulim Yamadayev, who Mosnews refers to as a "former rebel commander."

With the deployment of former Chechen rebels as Russian military commandos in Lebanon, the report this week exposing Russia's intelligence support for Hizbullah during the recent war takes on disturbing strategic significance. According to *Jane's Defense Weekly*, the Russian listening post on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights provided Hizbullah with a continuous supply of intelligence throughout the conflict.

Much still remains to be reported about the impressive intelligence capabilities that Hizbullah demonstrated this summer. But from what has already been made public, we know that Hizbullah's high degree of competence in electronic intelligence caused significant damage to IDF operations. Now we learn that Moscow stood behind at least one layer of Hizbullah's intelligence prowess.

Moscow's assistance to Hizbullah was not limited to intelligence sharing. The majority of IDF casualties in the fighting were caused by Russian-made Kornet anti-tank missiles that made their way to Hizbullah fighters through Syria. Indeed, as we learn more about Russia's role, it appears that Russia's support for Hizbullah may well have been as significant as Syria's support for the terror organization. And now we have Chechens in Lebanon.

Russian backing of Hizbullah, like its support for Syria and Iran, has been matched by its extreme, Cold War-esque hostility towards Israel. On Tuesday, Channel 2 reported that for the past few months Putin has been obsessively demanding that the government transfer proprietary rights and control to the Russian government

over the Russian Compound, which has served as a police station since the British Mandate, and other Russian historical buildings in central Jerusalem.

Putin's demand, which has no legal foundation or diplomatic precedent, exposes startling disrespect for Israeli sovereignty. According to Channel 2, Russian diplomats have been raising this obnoxious demand at the start of every meeting they have had with Israeli officials for the past several months. This most recently reported slap in the face joins a long list of diplomatic crises that Russia has fomented in the past few months.

In just one example, last month the Russians cancelled the Russia-Israel trade fair in Tel Aviv on the eve of its opening. Russian businessmen who had already arrived in Israel and were unable to get flights home the day of the announcement were ordered by the Russian embassy to remain in their hotel rooms until they returned to the airport for the first available flight to Russia.

Then there is Russia's unstinting support for Iran's nuclear weapons program. During the latest of his frequent visits to Teheran Tuesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced, yet again, that Russia opposes all international sanctions against Iran. Indeed, since Iran's nuclear program was exposed three years ago, Russia has acted as Iran's defender against every US attempt to galvanize the international community to take action to prevent Iran from achieving nuclear weapons capabilities.

In 1967 Russia played a central role in fanning the flames of war in Syria. In the months that preceded the Six Day War, Moscow fed Damascus a steady diet of false intelligence indicating that Israel was planning to invade. In the summer of 1973, the Soviets also encouraged Syria to join Egypt in invading Israel.

Whether or not Russia is interested in fomenting the next war, its intentions are less relevant than how Russia's extreme positions are interpreted by the Arabs. Judging by Syrian President Bashar Assad's recent bellicose speeches, it appears that Damascus believes that Russia will support Syria if it goes to war against Israel. In his latest address regarding Syria's willingness to go to war if Israel doesn't fork over the Golan Heights forthwith in "peace negotiations," Assad made clear his belief that whatever its level of intensity, a Syrian war against Israel could well advance his interests.

Russian influence is also evident in Assad's "peace" rhetoric. His protestations of willingness to conduct negotiations with Israel are taken directly from the Soviet playbook. As the reactions the speech elicited from leaders of the pro-Syrian camp in the Israeli Left like Maj.-Gen. (ret.) Uri Saguy, Education Minister Yuli Tamir, *Haaretz* columnist Yoel Marcus, and MK Azmi Bishara made clear, all that is needed to manipulate Israeli public opinion regarding Syrian intentions is a hollow and disingenuous Syrian announcement: If we abide by all of Damascus's demands (something Damascus will never allow us to do), then Syria will give us "peace," and if we don't, then the responsibility for the war that will ensue will be our own.

WHAT IS Israel doing to meet these gathering threats?

First we have our elected leaders. They contend with the growing threats by denying them, giving in to them and attempting to change the subject. The Olmert-Livni-Peretz government had no public reaction to the Russian-Chechen deployment in Lebanon. As far as the Israeli government is concerned, this issue, like the fact that Hizbullah has returned to its pre-war positions and that UNIFIL forces are doing nothing to prevent its rapid rearmament, should be of no interest to the public.

According to Channel 2, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is now leaning towards capitulating to Russia's demands and transferring proprietorship over the Russian Compound to the Russian government during his upcoming visit to Moscow.

As to Syria, rather than crafting a Syria policy, the government argues about the desirability of giving Syria the Golan Heights now or later. Above and beyond all else, as Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defense Minister Amir Peretz proclaim, from the government's perspective, the best way to deal with the growing military threats is to ignore them and destroy Israeli communities in Judea and Samaria.

Our political leaders are not the only ones involved here. It is the IDF's duty to sound the alarm bells and contend with these threats. But the IDF is doing no such thing. Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Dan Halutz claims that he is devoting all of his time to rebuilding the IDF after what he refers to as its "mediocre" performance in Lebanon. Practically speaking, however, Halutz is not contending with the threats. In an interview with *Yediot Aharonot* on Sunday, Halutz discounted the Syrian developments and maintained his position that we won the war in Lebanon and are feared by Hizbullah.

Far from contending with the IDF's "mediocrity," Halutz is prolonging it. The IDF's "mediocre" land campaign in Lebanon was led by Deputy COS Maj.-Gen. Moshe Kaplinsky, Operations Directorate Chief Maj.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot and Brig.-Gen. Tal Russo who oversaw the IDF's special operations. Rather than contend with these officers' demonstrated mediocrity, Halutz has promoted them. Eisenkot was appointed the new commander of Northern Command, and Russo will be promoted to major general and replace Eisenkot as head of Operations. Furthermore, Maj. Gen. Iddo Nehushtan who commands the Planning Directorate supports opening negotiations with Syria. Halutz promoted Nehushtan to his position after he led the IDF's failed media campaign during the conflict.

Halutz has repeatedly stated that he will resign if he feels that his authority is no longer accepted by the army. Yet, the primary officers who have felt the brunt of his authority - Armored Brigade 7 commander Col. Amnon Eshel and Maj.-Gen. Yiftach Ron-Tal - are the most prominent officers who have forthrightly attempted to point out the reality of the IDF's defeat.

It is clear why Halutz behaves this way. If he were to sound the alarm bells about the rising dangers in the North, he would have to admit that he failed in his command of the war. Similarly, if he were to bring new blood into the ground forces' chain of command, he would be effectively admitting that Kaplinsky, Eisenkot, Russo, and he as their commander, led the war irresponsibly. Indeed, the only way that Halutz can keep his job is by not contending with the dangerous military realities that have arisen as a result of the IDF's defeat in the war against Hizbullah this summer.

It is this policy of denial that motivated Halutz to fire Maj.-Gen. Ron-Tal from the service on Wednesday night for Ron-Tal's statement of the obvious: The year the IDF devoted to training its forces to expel the 9,500 Israeli civilians from Gaza and northern Samaria last summer came at the expense of training for war against Israel's enemies. It was also this policy of denial that motivated Halutz to bar Eshel from promotion for two years after Eshel pointed out how incompetently Division 91 Commander Brig.-Gen. Gal Hirsh commanded his forces in Lebanon.

Halutz accused Ron-Tal, who has been on paid leave pending his retirement for the past seven months, of bringing politics into the IDF for his statement that the IDF's single-minded devotion to the government's controversial political program harmed its war-fighting capabilities, and for his call for Halutz and Olmert to resign. Yet, during his tenure as chief of staff, Halutz has been slavish in his public devotion to the government's political preference for using the IDF to fight the Israeli residents of Judea, Samaria and Gaza over preparing for war against Israel's enemies.

ANY OBJECTIVE observer of the developments in our region understands that the storm of war is rapidly

approaching us. With Moscow's blessing, the Palestinians, Hizbullah, Syria and Iran are steadfastly preparing for battle.

There is no doubt that Israel can weather the coming storm. But to do this, we must have political and military leaders who are willing to recognize its inexorable approach.

A blue banner for Sportingbet. On the left, there is a glowing American football. The text "Bet on Canadian and US Sports" is written in white. Below this, the Sportingbet logo is on the left, followed by the text "Free \$50 Bet for new Canadian customers" in white. On the right, there is a red button with the text "Bet Now" in white.

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