

## Syrian Troops Enclose Lebanon, Rice Contacts Hamas

Contributed by Debka  
 Saturday, 25 October 2008  
 Last Updated Saturday, 25 October 2008

As part of the incipient thaw in US relations with Damascus, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has relayed a friendly message to Hamas political leader Khalid Meshaal through Syrian foreign minister Walid Muallem's aides.

The message, described by Moussa Abu Marzouk, one of the heads of Hamas's Damascus headquarters, as a "verbal communication" was received as four Syrian divisions completed their deployment on Lebanon's borders last week (see exclusive map). In the message, Rice praised the Palestinian terrorist group for halting its missile fire into Israel.

DEBKA-Net-Weekly 369 of Oct. 24 exposed the complete deployment - from the Syrian 4th Division along Lebanon's northern border and the 10th, 12th and 14th Divisions on Lebanon's eastern frontier opposite the Hermil mountains and the Beqaa Valley, and down to the Hermon Mountains facing South Lebanon and northern Israel.

Neither the Americans nor the Israelis had expected Damascus to round off this troop concentration so fast. It was taken for granted that Damascus would wait to the spring of 2009, after the rainy season. However, president Bashar Assad saw two advantages in going ahead before the Nov. 4 US presidential election:

First, Israel would be unlikely to strike in the days leading up to the US election and, second, Damascus would present the new man in the White House with a fait accompli.

The first concentration of 6-8,000 Syrian troops was disclosed in DEBKA-Net-Weekly 367 on Oct. 3 when two Syrian commando brigades of the 4th Mechanized Division took up positions along 2 km of the El Kebir River which marks that sector of the border - opposite northern Lebanon and its largest town of Tripoli.

Then, last week, Damascus consigned the 12th Mechanized Division to the border of the Lebanese Beqaa Valley and its central mountains, so completing the encirclement.

Syrian military positions now range from points opposite the northern Lebanese town of Al Qaa on Mt. Hermil to points further south up to the Massena border crossing 50 km north of Beirut. The Syrian 4th and 12th Divisions abut on the 10th Division ranged opposite South Lebanon and the disputed Shebaa Farms enclave. The military chain continues with the 14th commando division positioned on the Syrian slopes of Mt Hermon opposite Israeli military positions.

Not only are Lebanon's borders enclosed, but Syria, in conjunction with Iran, has also established a military presence inside Lebanon. In the summer, they emplaced radar stations on the tall Lebanese peaks of Mt. Sannine and Barukh of the central mountain range, giving them a detailed view of every move on Lebanese territory, in northern Israel and on the eastern Mediterranean.

All these movements were performed with a nod and a wink from Washington.

Three years after forcing Syria to quit Lebanon, the Bush administration was ready to okay Syria's massed troop concentration on Lebanese borders. Permission was granted in an apparently cursory meeting between Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Syrian foreign minister Walid Muallem on Sept. 27 at UN Center in New York.

Damascus counted this as validation of its drive for restored domination of Lebanon by dint of its military.

Washington also satisfied itself that the deal promised major profits:

1. The Assad government sounded willing for the first time to obstruct Hizballah and hold up its supplies of military hardware.

Syria's 4th and 12 Divisions are in position for blocking Hizballah's primary smuggling routes.

2. It was inferred that Damascus was at last beginning, albeit two years late, to honor UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which banned arms supplies to Hizballah as part of the ceasefire which ended the Israel-Lebanon war. Syria and Iran mocked that resolution for two years by smuggling weapons in bulk to the Shiite terrorists.

3. Damascus's implied willingness to go against Hizballah was taken by Washington as a measure of Assad's readiness to stand up to Iran at present - and break away in the future.

4. And might not that willingness be extended to embrace Tehran's other terrorist protégés, the Palestinian Hamas and Jihad Islami, both of whose headquarters have long been welcome in Damascus?

DEBKA-Net-Weekly's Middle East sources stressed that, for the time being, all these exciting benefits are no more than fond hopes, which the Bush administration cannot hope to see fully developed in the short months remaining of its term - if at all. Bashar Assad's relations with the United States are littered with a trail of broken promises, as Rice's predecessor, Colin Powell, can affirm.

Nevertheless, the secretary of state keeps pushing on.

DEBKAfile's Washington and Middle East sources reveal that the message she addressed to Hamas's political chief Khaled Meshaal in Damascus was the first communication ever from a senior US official to the Palestinian fundamentalists, which Washington lists as a terrorist group. Rice even complimented Hamas for halting its missile and rocket fire into Israel and voiced the hope that Palestinian organization would go further and join Palestinian-Israeli diplomacy.

After Moussa Abu Marzouk on Oct. 22, spilled the beans of what he called American recognition of his organization, the state department issued a hurried denial and set up an interview for Assistant Secretary of State David Welch with the London-based Saudi paper Shawq al Awsat.

The interviewer, Manal Lutfi, pushed hard for an admission of the US-Syrian détente, citing examples. But Welch stuck to his guns: "I say there is no revision of our policies towards Syria."

Formally speaking, he was truthful. However, the groundwork has certainly been laid for the major revision which he denied. Syrian troops have been allowed to openly close in on Lebanon without a demurrer from the Bush administration. Washington has been caught out communicating with Bashar Assad's extremist Palestinian guest, Hamas, for the first time.

The outcome of these preliminaries - milestone in themselves - will no doubt come to light only when a new president sits in the White House and Israel has a new government after a general election early next year

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As a matter of fact - CRNews disputes the opinion of this article that the US gave a green light to Syria to involve its troops into Lebanon. CRNews believes the US Administration did not give a green light, as a matter of fact numerous sources - open source information - indicates just the opposite.

i.e. US Sends Warning Message to Syria

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