

Israel, Russia

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Olmert to Focus on Russo-Iranian Nuclear Proposal

Summary

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will be meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Oct. 18, just two days after Putin made a very public display of support for Iran during his trip to Tehran. Olmert's discussion with Putin will center on a proposal Putin allegedly made to Iran to scale back its nuclear program. This deal was likely the price Putin set in exchange for defending Iran against a U.S. attack.

Analysis

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will be meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Oct. 18. Though the meeting is being widely described as a "snap visit" following Putin's attention-grabbing trip to Iran, it appears that this meeting had been planned as early as a week ago and is intended to commemorate the 16th anniversary of the restoration of diplomatic relations between Russia and Israel. Olmert paid a trip to Russia for the anniversary last year as well.

Olmert's trip to Moscow may not have been as urgently scheduled as previously thought, but the meeting is still significant. Israel closely monitored Putin's trip to Iran, watching for any signs that he would throw Iran a big bone that could increase the Iranian threat to Israel. Such a bone could have been anything from a Russian commitment to the Iranians to begin fuel shipments to the Bushehr nuclear power plant to a major weapons sale that could seriously complicate U.S. and Israeli military strategy against Iran.

However, the Russians appear to be playing it cool. Putin paid lip service to the Iranians, reassuring them that Russia's delays over the past decade in completing Bushehr were not politically motivated, and declaring that the United States will not be allowed to use any former Soviet Republic (i.e., Azerbaijan) to attack Iran. But Putin has also taken care to hedge his statements, saying that Russia is not going to set a timeline for fuel shipments to Bushehr. (Once Iran receives nuclear fuel, Bushehr can gradually be maximized for power generation or weapons-grade output.)

The Iranians, on the other hand, are naturally playing up Putin's visit for all it is worth. Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani said Oct. 17 that Putin had a "special view" about the Iranian nuclear program, and that Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was studying a proposal on the nuclear program that Putin had personally presented to him. Larijani went on to say that this coveted proposal would be made public "at an appropriate time." This prompts the question: What exactly did Putin offer the Iranians?

IRNA, Iran's state-owned media, has hinted that Putin's proposal consists of Iran temporarily suspending enrichment activity in exchange for a sanctions freeze. This proposal is not new, however. The International Atomic Energy Agency and the Europeans have discussed the exact same proposal with the Iranians to no avail. For Iran, the nuclear negotiations are a means of extracting political benefits from the United States over Iraq, and until Washington and Tehran reach an agreement, Tehran will not give up its leverage.

Though the proposal itself does not appear to be all that groundbreaking, Iran could have another purpose in hinting to the West that it could reach a Russian-brokered compromise over its nuclear program. Iran was greatly relieved to have received a public display of Russian support during Putin's visit, in which Putin essentially told the West that if a Western attack against Iran involved any cooperation with former Soviet republics, Washington would be on a collision course with Moscow. In return for throwing its support behind Iran, Russia now expects Tehran to eliminate the reason for an attack by moving toward cooperation on the nuclear program. After all, Russia does not want to see an Iranian nuclear device any more than Israel or the United States do. Russia also gets the added benefit of demonstrating to the West that it has real leverage over Iran, and can use that in its own dealings with Washington.

Whether a potential deal over the nuclear issue is actually implemented is another question, however. Russia and Iran have plenty of reason right now to work together and talk up a deal, but their opportunistic relationship is still marked with deep distrust. In any case, Putin's nuclear proposal likely has Olmert intrigued, to say the least, and will be the highlight of their discussions in Moscow.