

## Michael J. Totten - Syria's Useful Israeli Idiots

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The Syrian state-run propaganda organ Cham Press published a fake story about Lebanese Member of Parliament Walid Jumblatt's supposed plan to meet Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak in the United States last weekend to coordinate a regime-change in Syria. No Western media organization I know of took this non-story seriously. Israeli media, though, scooped it right up. Haaretz, the Jerusalem Post, and Infolive TV published their own articles about the imaginary meeting between Jumblatt and Barak. None had a source for their story other than the Syrian government's website.

It goes without saying that Israeli journalists aren't in cahoots with the Baath Party regime in Damascus. Many Israeli reporters and editors, however, are frankly clueless about Lebanese and Syrian politics.

First of all, it is illegal for a Lebanese citizen to speak to an Israeli citizen no matter where in the world their meeting takes place. Even quietly waving hello to an Israeli on the border is treason.

A significant portion of the Lebanese people sided with Israel during the first Lebanon War in 1982, including Lebanon's president-elect Bashir Gemayel before he was assassinated. The South Lebanese Army was Israel's proxy militia in what is now Hizballah-controlled territory, until then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak withdrew Israeli occupation forces from their "security belt" in South Lebanon in 2000. The draconian law is in place precisely to prevent such sympathizers from working with Israelis against Lebanese.

The law is absurd from the West's point of view, and from the point of view of many Lebanese, too. Lebanon is "the least anti-Israel Arab country in the world," as Lebanese political consultant and analyst Eli Khoury told me last year. But Lebanon, despite its moderation outside the Hizballah camp, is still under the shadow of the Syrian-Iranian axis, and remains threatened with de facto re-annexation. The reactionary law is still on the books, and even a leader as prominent as Walid Jumblatt dare not break it.

Jumblatt traveled to Washington this past weekend to give a speech at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which you can read here. After Cham Press published its fabricated story, his office phoned the institute to make sure the Israeli Defense Minister would not be attending. He needed to be sure the two could not even run into each other by accident and make Syria's bogus assertion look true.

Israeli journalists who "reported" this non-story should have noticed that they published a claim that Jumblatt and Barak will meet in the United States after the meeting was supposed to have already happened. Cham Press said the meeting would take place on Sunday, and Israeli media placed the alleged meeting in the future tense the following Monday.

Re-reporting Syrian lies in the Israeli press makes Cham Press look almost legitimate, its lies almost plausible. This should be obvious, but apparently it isn't. The Damascus regime knows what it is doing and has been using gullible foreign journalists to its advantage for a while now.

"Regime flacks fed New Yorker reporter Seymour Hersh outrageous propaganda about how the United States supposedly supported the Fatah al-Islam terrorists in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian camp in Lebanon," said Tony Badran, a Lebanese research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. "Then they quoted his New Yorker story to get themselves diplomatically off the hook for their own support of those terrorists in the camp."

And here we go again. Cham Press now says Israel's Omedia reported that Jumblatt met with Barak and U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney in Washington. Cham Press no longer quotes only itself; it quotes Israeli websites as backup. But the only reason Israeli media reported any of this in the first place is the initial false story appearing in Cham Press. Syrian media is still just quoting itself—only now it does so through Israel.

Jumblatt is near or at the top of Syria's hit list. No Lebanese leader opposes Syrian terrorism and attempts at overlordship in Lebanon as staunchly as he. His pro-Western "March 14" bloc in parliament is already accused of being a "Zionist hand" by Hizballah and the Syrians. He was the second person Syrian ruler Bashar Assad threatened by name shortly before former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and 21 others were

assassinated by a truck bomb in downtown Beirut. (&ldquo;I will break Lebanon over your head and Walid Jumblatt&rsquo;s,&rdquo; Assad said to Hariri.) As Tony Badran pointed out to me, the Syrian regime has a habit of planting false stories about Lebanese leaders just before dispatching them with car bombs. The idea of Jumblatt meeting with Barak may seem innocent in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, but it marks him for death in Lebanon and in Syria.

Syria is at war with both Israel and Lebanon. Journalists who wish to write about a conspiracy between Israel and Lebanon to destroy the regime in Syria need a better source for that story than the manipulative and murderous Syrian state.

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