

Ilyumzhinov Discusses Unrest and Chess in Syria

By [Howard Amos](#)

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"My principle is that ... people should play chess better than they make war," says Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, 50. **Sergei Porter**

Embattled Syrian President Bashar Assad will be hoping that third time's the charm after a visit from the head of the International Chess Federation and alien-spotter Kirsan Ilyumzhinov.

The former leader of the Kalmykia republic famously dropped by Saddam Hussein's Baghdad on the eve of the U.S. invasion in 2003, and played a game of chess with Moammar Gadhafi as NATO bombs rained down on war-ravaged Libya last year. Both of the authoritarian Arab rulers were subsequently killed.

Ilyumzhinov spent three hours in talks with Assad in late April after flying in from an event in Chicago where he rubbed shoulders with celebrities including Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, Hollywood director Oliver Stone and former U.S. President Bill Clinton.

Assad has remained in his post as president despite the violence between government and rebel forces that erupted last year, claiming thousands of lives.

In an interview with *The Moscow Times*, Ilyumzhinov said the weapons used against the Syrian regime were being supplied from European countries with NATO membership.

"They're not peaceful demonstrations. ... These are mercenaries who are fighting," he said. "It's interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign foreign state, and all civilized countries should very strongly condemn these bandits and terrorists."

He insisted that Assad was committed to a six-point peace plan brokered by United Nations-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan. In addition to the domestic situation, the two men also discussed chess, which Assad promised to introduce as part of the Syrian school curriculum from September.

Ilyumzhinov, 50, is an accomplished chess player in his own right and has a significant personal fortune. And, as a former regional leader, he has ties to the Kremlin. Arkady Dvorkovich, an economic aide to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and chairman of the Russian Chess Federation, personally stepped in to support Ilyumzhinov's 2010 bid to retain the top spot at the International Chess Federation, or FIDE, during a bitter battle with Soviet chess legend Anatoly Karpov.

While Ilyumzhinov studied at the Moscow State Institute of Foreign Relations and has been identified by some as an unofficial government envoy in his globetrotting, he firmly denies that he is working on the behalf of any country.

"Why do I need to agree with the Foreign Ministry or France or Germany or the U.S.?" he asked. "I visit as the president of FIDE. ... My principle is that there should be peace throughout the whole world and that people should play chess better than they make war."

There are currently about 600 million people who play chess, estimates Ilyumzhinov, who has been president of FIDE since 1995. But he wants to boost that number to 1 billion, or every seventh person on the planet, a project he calls "perestroika of the mind."

Photographs — and even a tapestry — of President Vladimir Putin jostle with pictures of the Dalai Lama and a bust of Winston Churchill in Ilyumzhinov's offices in Kalmykia's Moscow representative office.

"If 1 billion people play chess, then there are 1 billion people who think first and then act," Ilyumzhinov said. "It is more likely that from this billion there'll be more people who become parliamentary deputies, mayors, presidents, kings and ministers."

Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery is hosting a FIDE World Chess Championship this month that will see Israel's Boris Gelfand challenge the reigning champion, Viswanathan Anand, for \$2.5 million in prize money.

Ilyumzhinov believes that chess was brought to the world thousands of years ago by nonhuman forces. He links the 64 squares of a chessboard to the 64 codons in human DNA.

"Chess is a particular code," he said. "Black and white, yin and yang, men and women, angel

and devil, good and evil. ... It's logical that chess came to us from another civilization."

He is frank about his beliefs and the skepticism they arouse. "Maybe some people laugh and think I am mad, but there are thousands of scientists in the world who think like this," he said.

Ilyumzhinov even has some knowledge of the other peoples that populate the universe and who may have passed on chess.

The Buddhist believer said he has seen aliens three times — as a boy, when serving in the army in Rostov-on-Don, and when he was abducted from his Moscow apartment by human-like creatures in yellow spacesuits in 1997.

"I am looking forward to the next time," he said.

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