

Changing Assad's Incentive Structure: Christopher in the 'Lion's Den'

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff), [Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](/experts/alan-makovsky)

Apr 22, 1996

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



[Alan Makovsky \(/experts/alan-makovsky\)](/experts/alan-makovsky)

Alan Makovsky is a senior fellow for national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.



Brief Analysis

As foreign ministers of seven countries descended upon Damascus and Operation Grapes of Wrath shifted into low gear, katyushas continued to fall on northern Israel over the weekend, bringing the count to nearly 500 over the past twelve days. Apparently, none of the seven -- American, French, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Irish and Iranian -- came to condemn Syria for re-supplying Hizbollah with hundreds of missiles from Tehran last week. Rather, they were there to bid up President Hafiz al-Assad's services for cooling a border conflict he himself heated up. For Secretary of State Christopher -- kept waiting while Assad chats with old friends, like Russian Foreign Minister Primakov and Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati -- a more nightmarish diplomatic scenario is difficult to imagine.

Background: In 1990, there were 19 Hizbollah incidents (attacks, ambushes or missile launches) against Israelis troops or civilians in northern Israel or Israel's south Lebanon "security zone"; in 1993, there were 158. That July, then-Prime Minister Rabin responded with Operation Accountability, whose goal was to force Lebanese refugees northward, provoking the Beirut government to lobby overlord Syria to rein in Hizbollah and establish acceptable "rules of engagement" to govern the border conflict. After seven days, and with U.S. mediation, the plan worked, with Assad and Rabin assenting to vague, unwritten understandings that proscribed Hizbollah attacks on northern Israel and Israeli attacks on civilian targets in Lebanon. Though Hizbollah operations continued to rise (187 incidents in 1994, 344 in 1995), Accountability was deemed a success because most clashes were restricted to Lebanese territory. At the time, Syria had a clear incentive to restrain Hizbollah -- ongoing Israel-Syria peace negotiations. U.S. diplomats believed that a breakthrough in peace talks might emerge from the positive experience of resolving the Hizbollah "ground rules." (To the astonishment of virtually everyone, not least Assad, the imminent breakthrough came at Oslo, not Damascus).

Three years later, much has changed, mostly to Syria's detriment. Assad's path to improved ties with Washington -- i.e., Israel-Syria peace talks -- were suspended in March following the Hamas/Islamic Jihad suicide bombings while Syria has suffered the ignominy of the Sharm el-Sheikh counter-terrorism summit and the blossoming of the Israel-Turkey

and Israel-Jordan strategic relationships. Against this background, Assad had no compunction in permitting Iran and its Hizbollah ward to raise the level of violence against Israeli targets. As a result, 16 Israelis have died since January in Hizbollah attacks that increasingly exploited the immunity of civilian targets to operate from villages, towns and -- as now confirmed by the UN -- under the nose of UNIFIL troops. Fearful of foreclosing any peacemaking options with Damascus, Israel did not respond in kind but eventually, under heavy domestic pressure, Jerusalem asked Washington to intercede; when Assad refused to restrain his proxy, Israel's response was Grapes of Wrath. But if Israeli leaders believed that operation could actually improve upon the legacy of Accountability -- i.e., forcing Assad not only to rein in Hizbollah but to accept more stringent "rules of engagement" -- they evidently miscalculated.

With Israel enjoying regional success, partly at Syria's expense, Assad in 1996 lacks the incentive he had in 1993 to restore calm in Lebanon. Certainly, the loss of Lebanese lives -- let alone a Lebanese refugee flight -- are problems he can live with. Some argue that Israel believed Assad has an incentive in boosting Shimon Peres' electoral prospects, but Assad thus far has shown little inclination to help; instead, his behavior suggests the Syrian press should be taken at its word when it spews bile at Labor and Likud with equal ferocity: "What the politicians and generals of the Zionist military establishment are doing is the apex of organized state terrorism; they are waging an electoral campaign on behalf of both Shimon Peres and the Likud and other extremist parties," editorialized the official daily al-Thawra last Friday. "What is this Israeli Nazi monster trying to tell the world?" The fact is that Assad may prefer a Likud victory over Labor, as a way to shield him from blame for scuttling the peace talks altogether. No one knows for sure.

An alternative Israeli strategy was to force, rather than entice, Assad to act against Hizbollah by targeting Syrian forces, katyusha trans-shipment routes or Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the Bekaa. If this approach was contemplated, Israel apparently decided against it and even apologized when Syrian troops were hit outside Beirut. In the end, Grapes of Wrath deployed less military force (e.g., no ground forces or commando raids) than in 1993 in order to achieve greater political aims (e.g., better rules of engagement). As a result, the imbalance of incentive was never addressed. Lacking an overpowering incentive to act, Assad didn't.

Advantage, Assad: Israel entered Grapes of Wrath with three tiers of operational goals: first, to jump-start a grand plan for Israel-Lebanon peace -- i.e., the deployment of Lebanon's 65,000-man army southward, to impose security on areas where Hizbollah operates freely, as the first step toward total Israeli withdrawal and a bilateral peace treaty. But for Assad, whose own talks with Israel are on hold, permitting Lebanon to take the lead is a non-starter. Second best would be a cease-fire that improves upon the 1993 understandings. Last week, a poll showed two-thirds of Israelis felt Grapes of Wrath should continue until an overall cease-fire that included an end to attacks in the security zone; only one-quarter said they would be satisfied with a simple cessation of katyusha attacks on northern Israel. Here, Syria's negotiating posture benefits from Israeli expectations. Israel's third option is to cut its diplomatic losses and accept a restatement of the 1993 understandings, perhaps on a written basis. If this indeed left northern Israel free from further katyushas, this would have the benefit of ending an operation gone sour, permitting Peres to focus on more positive developments, such as the revocation of the PLO charter that is expected later this week. The risk here is that any resumption of Hizbollah's activities -- from an ambush of Israeli troops in the security zone to a car-bomb in a faraway capital -- would suggest that Grapes of Wrath had been for naught, with its negative boomerang on Peres' re-election prospects.

As Grapes of Wrath proceeded without upping the ante for Assad, realizing these objectives became increasingly more difficult; following the bombing of a UNIFIL outpost by an errant IDF shell, killing scores of Lebanese refugees, the momentum turned fully in Assad's favor. Already, Assad's inaction has succeeded in attracting the seven foreign ministers; scuttling the April 22 Luxembourg ministerial follow-up meeting to the Sharm el-Sheikh summit; forcing Tunisia to postpone opening its interest section with Israel; and stirring Egypt's al-Ahram to call for a total halt to normalization with Israel until "comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace is concluded." If he holds out a few more days, Assad will be the main focus of Thursday's Israeli Independence Day festivities and may even force Peres to postpone

his triumphant trip to Washington next weekend. Not a bad week for a leader of a weak, poor, heavily indebted country whose only allies are Iran and North Korea.

U.S. policy: For an honorable diplomat like Warren Christopher, the embarrassment of competing with the foreign minister of one terror-supporting state (Iran) for "face-time" with the leader of another (Syria) -- while Hizbollah's own boss waits nearby -- must be galling. But now that he is the lion's den, Christopher faces a choice: to follow the lead of his Russian and European counterparts, who have been silent on Assad's complicity in Hizbollah terrorism as a way to achieve a Lebanon cease-fire or to recognize that the utility of Washington's own "critical dialogue" with Syria has run its course and that the current situation demands a thorough review of U.S. policy -- highlighting Syrian culpability in the triangle with Iran and Hizbollah -- as part of an effort to salvage the strategic goals of a military operation to which Washington assented from the start.

In the near term, all potential outcomes -- including a souped-up status quo ante -- further legitimize Syria's domination of Lebanon (except France's wild, high-risk gambit to boost Iran as a counterweight to Syria). But unless Washington extracts a clear price from Assad for this now -- i.e., dismantling Hizbollah's military capabilities and severing its strategic ties with Iran -- Assad will find a way to sell the same service again, for even higher stakes. Tactically, a toughened Syria policy includes strong condemnation of Syria's re-supply of Hizbollah; reaffirmation of U.S. support of the Ta'if accord, whose provisions for Syrian military re-deployment are years overdue; de-legitimization of the Syrian and Iranian presence in Lebanon; and dark warnings about how Syria teeters on full admission to the club of "backlash" states, with all that implies in terms of political ties and economic sanctions. Simply mentioning these four items would be a useful first step in correcting a policy which allots Syria a grossly outsized role in the Middle East and permits Assad a "Teflon occupation" of Lebanon -- praise when silence falls, but no blame when katyushas fall.

Robert Satloff and Alan Makovsky are, respectively, executive director and senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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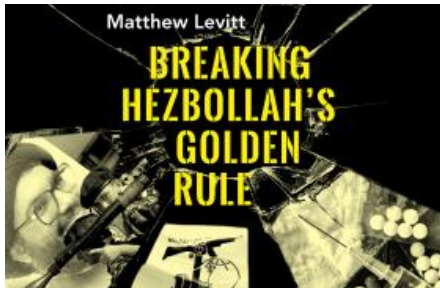
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