

The Damascus-Hizballah Axis:

Bashar al-Asad's Vision of a New Middle East

by [Seth Wikas \(/experts/seth-wikas\)](/experts/seth-wikas)

Aug 29, 2006

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Seth Wikas \(/experts/seth-wikas\)](/experts/seth-wikas)

Seth Wikas is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on opposition elements to the Syrian regime.



Brief Analysis

On August 15, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad gave a significant policy speech to the Syrian Journalists Union in which he expressed his support for Hizballah. More importantly, the address sought to redefine Syria's position in the Arab world. Building on Washington's talk of the birth of a new Middle East, Asad described his own vision for a new Middle East, one with an empowered Arab resistance, a weakened Israel, and a renewed regional unity against Western interests.

Core Messages

Criticism of anti-Syrian Arab regimes and leaders. In a grand departure from his previous public remarks, Asad attacked his Arab counterparts, past and present, assailing "supposed Arab sages" and "half-men" who brought nothing but defeat and humiliation to the region. He criticized the Arab leaders who believed Hizballah would be unable to confront Israel effectively. Asad said that Hizballah's success in forcing Israeli to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000 proved those Arab leaders wrong.

However, in his speech, Asad's greatest criticism came in his comparison between the current anti-Syrian Lebanese leadership and those who supported the Israeli-Lebanese peace agreement of May 17, 1983. Across the Arab world, the May 17 agreement was viewed as illegitimate. Although the Lebanese parliament ratified it in 1984, Lebanon's then-president Amin Gemayel never signed it, leading to its collapse. Asad invoked the agreement in his discussion of the March 14 forces, the anti-Damascus coalition currently in power in Beirut, led by Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt. Asad described the March 14 forces as Israeli and American agents who invited Israel to make war on Lebanon in order to undermine Hizballah.

Unwavering support for Hizballah. Syrian support for Hizballah is nothing new. Since the group's formation in the early 1980s, Syria has offered its territory as a training ground and transit point for Hizballah arms and personnel. Damascus has also given money and arms to the organization. Advocating Hizballah's "resistance," Asad emphasizes in his speech that when negotiations between conflicting parties fail, resistance remains as the viable alternative for conflict resolution. Resistance and peace are not separate, he says, but "constitute the pillar . . . and he who supports part of it has to support the other part." The Syrian president affirmed the legitimacy of the resistance, saying it is an honor and source of pride for the Syrian people, and he himself expresses his "appreciation and admiration to the men of resistance" in Lebanon.

Asad also tackled the nature of resistance and its relationship with the Lebanese government in his address. He argued that resistance takes its legitimacy from the government and the people, not permission from the government, an ironic distinction given that Asad heads a one-party dictatorship.

Israel's weakened position. Asad expressed great pride in Hizballah's battles against Israel, and he focused on Israel's weakened military position after the war. He notes that Israel's 1982 invasion of Beirut was completed within a week, but in 2006 after five weeks the Israeli military "is still struggling and suffering to occupy several hundreds of meters here and there" of Lebanese territory. Asad noted that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have lost the credibility they once had, remarking that the Hizballah victory is even greater as the technical gap between Israel and the Lebanese has widened over the past two decades. In contrast to 1982, he said, the Arab forces fighting against Israel have shown that they are now better trained, organized, and led, and that Arab fighters are now more determined than they ever were. Hizballah won the war against Israel, Asad argued, not only at its end but from the very beginning of the hostilities. The goal for Asad now is to translate the military victory into victory on the Lebanese political battlefield, which will create a new Lebanon with Hizballah playing an even more central role.

Appeal to pan-Arabism. One of the significant themes in Asad's speech was the return to pan-Arab rhetoric. The regime of Bashar and his late father Hafiz al-Asad has long given lip service to notions of Arab unity and solidarity. The novelty of Bashar's pan-Arab rhetoric in his recent speech comes from his condemnation of the failures of the past and his long diatribe describing the Arab world's failures and humiliations during the twentieth century. Asad said that one source of Israeli military strength is the moral and physical weakness of the Arabs. He also conceded that Arabs have talked much and done little throughout their history, and are rarely able to agree on anything. In this context, Asad lauded Hizballah as a model for transforming resistance from a purely Lebanese phenomenon into a shared Arab phenomenon.

Assessment

Asad's speech accomplished three goals: criticizing the anti-Damascus government in Beirut; reaffirming Syrian support of Hizballah; and reviving, at least rhetorically, pan-Arab themes that had been on the wane in recent years. While Asad did not address most of his critics and enemies by name, he explicitly identified the March 14 forces, calling them Israeli agents. The speech was also aimed at those Arab regimes—notably Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states—that did not support Hizballah in its war against Israel because they fear the growing power of the group's Iranian patron and an increase in the regional political and religious influence of Tehran's Shiite regime.

Asad affirmed Syria's strong bond with Hizballah. The Syria-Hizballah connection goes back nearly two decades, and as an ally of Iran, Syria is positioned to be the Arab state in the region with the most to gain by Hizballah's rise. If Hizballah and Iran continue to grow in influence and prominence, Asad's position will be enhanced; he will be associated with the only Arab leader—Hizballah chief Hassan Nasrallah—who has been able to inflict military and psychological damage on Israel. Indeed, following Asad's speech, a Syrian Baath Party member announced that the state-authorized Front for the Liberation of the Golan will fight against Israel using Hizballah's tactics. Asad's speech and the formation of such an organization illustrate how deeply Hizballah's success has become a new model for confrontation with Israel.

In backing Nasrallah, Asad has found a way to take up the program of his father. Throughout the 1970s, Hafiz al-Asad attempted to unify the Arab Levant via his patronage of the Palestinians, involvement in Lebanon, and attempts to bring Jordan into his orbit. In the 1990s, Asad replaced his pan-Arabism with pan-Islamism, using Damascus as a haven for groups such as Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad. With the rise of Hizballah and its message of Arab resistance against Israel and the West, Bashar al-Asad hopes to ride Hizballah's coattails to reassert pan-Arabist themes. By saying that resistance and peace "constitute the same pillar," Asad created a new Syrian pan-Arab rhetoric that contrasts the Arab failures of the past with the success of a new movement with Hizballah and Syria in

the vanguard.

In recent weeks, Asad has projected a stronger position vis-à-vis Israel, rejecting Israeli demands for the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon to be deployed on the Syria-Lebanon border in order to prevent the smuggling of weapons to Hizballah. Calling it harmful to Lebanese autonomy, Asad refused any initiative that would declare a border between Syria and Lebanon without settling the dispute over Israel's control of Shebaa Farms. In rejecting a UN presence on the Syrian-Lebanese border, wholeheartedly supporting Hizballah's attacks on Israel, and explicitly saying that peace and resistance go hand in hand, Syria is at least rhetorically moving toward a new stage in its confrontation with Israel.

Conclusion

Hizballah's successes in the war with Israel appear to have emboldened Asad, raising the specter that Damascus may consider violating the 1974 ceasefire in the Golan. At the same time, however, he has isolated himself in the Arab world. After calling Arab leaders who did not support Hizballah "half-men," newspapers in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia unleashed a flurry of personal attacks on Asad. Despite the Syrian leader's critical rhetoric and his ongoing efforts to unruffle Arab feathers, Asad remains the most powerful Arab patron of Hizballah. This alliance will be the key to determining Hizballah's place in Lebanon and among its sovereign Arab neighbors and Syria's next steps vis-à-vis Israel.

Seth Wikas will be a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute starting this autumn. ❖

Policy #1142

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)