

Is All Quiet on Israel's Northern Front?

Feb 27, 2004



Brief Analysis

For much of the upcoming presidential election season, the United States will no doubt be preoccupied with domestic affairs on the one hand, and the postwar transition in Iraq on the other. Although Washington undoubtedly hopes for a quiet year in the Middle East, reality might bring less desirable results. In the Arab-Israeli arena, the most significant threat to regional stability (beyond Palestinian terrorism) is the Syria-Hizballah-Iran triangle. Hizballah and Syria appear to be reverting to their traditional pattern of ratcheting up terrorist activity whenever they feel they are being ignored. Unless an effort of some sort is made to halt such escalation, Israel's northern front will become the site of a broader conflict in which neither Israel nor the United States wants to become enmeshed at the moment.

The Syrian Perspective

On December 1, 2003, the New York Times published an interview with Syrian president Bashar al-Asad in which he called for the renewal of peace talks with Israel under U.S. supervision. Official Israeli and American responses to this call were perceived in Syria as unenthusiastic at best. The last time Syria felt that it was not being taken seriously was in April 2002, when the Israeli military reentered West Bank cities during Operation Defensive Shield. In the midst of that operation, Asad permitted Hizballah to ignite the Israel-Lebanon border, signaling to Israel and the rest of the world that he should not be ignored. Over the course of ten short days, Hizballah conducted thirteen terrorist attacks, which amounted to more than 40 percent of all Hizballah attacks since Israel withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000. These incidents included shootings, shelling, and the firing of katyusha rockets at Israeli posts and villages along the border.

The situation was cooled down only by a timely combination of Israeli restraint and a successful visit by U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell to Damascus. Recognizing that Hizballah's carefully planned strategic trap was aimed at dragging the Israeli military into battle in the north at the same time that it was operating in the West Bank, Israel purposely avoided any retaliatory steps. For his part, Powell interrupted his original tour to Israel and the Palestinian territories and paid Asad an unexpected visit in order to defuse the tension. Even Iran preferred calm, sending Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi to Beirut to publicly demand that Hizballah immediately cease its armed activity along the Israel-Lebanon border.

Although the 2002 crisis eventually subsided, the Syrian regime continues to host the leaders of terrorist organizations that operate and sponsor activities in the Palestinian territories. These individuals, considered the "external leadership" of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), advocate and actively foster terrorism against Israelis. (This harsh line contrasts with that of Hamas's more practical "internal" leadership, which sometimes advocates ceasefires of the same sort that the Egyptian government has attempted to establish.) Through these organizations, Syria has actively endeavored to wreak havoc on Israel with incessant suicide bombings that cause massive civilian casualties. If Asad once again comes to believe that the world is not treating him with the respect he feels he deserves, then he will likely promote further terrorist escalation via these proxies in order to regain that coveted international attention. Specifically, rather than sitting quietly, the Syrians may revert to a strategy of

promoting terrorist activity through Hizballah. Igniting the Israel-Lebanon border or relaying operational instructions from Hamas and PIJ headquarters in Damascus to field operatives in the Palestinian territories would send a crystal clear message that Syria is still a key regional player.

The Hizballah Perspective

The first phase of Israel's prisoner exchange deal with Hizballah ended on January 29, 2004. Shortly thereafter, Shaykhs Hassan Nasrallah of Hizballah and Ahmed Yassin of Hamas stated unequivocally that they would continue to fight Israel and kidnap Israeli soldiers as leverage for securing the release of other terrorists in Israeli prisons (al-Manar television, January 25). Given the history of the two organizations, the appropriate question is not whether such kidnappings will occur, but when. Hizballah made a public threat to kidnap Israelis just a few weeks before it captured three soldiers in an October 7, 2000, ambush at Har Dov. Currently, Hizballah has no such bargaining chips, and its cause has had little popular legitimacy since the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. With the help of Syria and Iran, however, the organization has been able to maintain both its crusade against Israel and its overall jihadist identity. Hizballah's latest assumption is probably that 2004 will be a "vacuum year" in which neither the United States nor Israel will engage it—Washington will be preoccupied with the upcoming presidential election while Israel will likely continue to focus on Palestinian terrorism.

The Syria-Hizballah-Iran Triangle

It is important to maintain a vigilant watch over Syria and Iran and to convince Damascus that using Hizballah to heighten tensions along the Israel-Lebanon border will not serve its interests. Syria is the only country capable of disarming Hizballah and, together with Iran, quelling the present regional conflict. Hizballah is well aware of Syria's power and invariably takes it into consideration before acting.

Although Iranian support for terrorism is a constant, it is worth mentioning that international pressure has led Iran to publicly, albeit subtly, change its rhetoric regarding Hizballah. Hassan Rohani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, recently stated that Hizballah will no longer have a military role to play in the region once Israel retreats from the disputed Shebaa Farms. Rohani's well-publicized quote was no doubt tailored to a European audience in an effort to fend off further probes into the status of Iran's weapons of mass destruction programs. Nevertheless, this stance proves that continued pressure on Tehran can pay dividends.

Conclusion

President Asad wishes to open a dialogue with Washington, and he likely feels that his initiative to resume peace talks with Israel is a convenient starting point. He seems to believe that publicly declaring his intent to resume such talks is sufficient, however, even though Washington clearly expects concrete action. In fact, the United States has repeatedly indicated that Asad must take initial trust-building steps such as controlling Hizballah, preventing terrorist spillage from Syria into Iraq, and putting an end to terrorism directed from Hamas and PIJ headquarters in Damascus. Given Israel's current focus on Gaza, however, Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations do not appear to be in the cards for the time being.

Perhaps Asad will eventually come to appreciate the benefits to be gained from abandoning terrorism. His wife, Asma al-Asad, could help to convince him of these benefits, given her Western background and understanding of modern economies. In particular, she could highlight the importance of avoiding new economic sanctions that could have long-term negative consequences for the regime. Moreover, intelligence channels could be used to circumvent the tight ring of "old guards" around Asad and communicate with him covertly regarding the importance of abandoning terrorism. Finally, the potential financial boost and global acceptance accorded to Libya after its abandonment of weapons of mass destruction may encourage Asad to follow in Muammar Qadhafi's footsteps.

It would be imprudent to assume that Damascus will behave passively over the next year. An alternative approach

would be to prepare for any action that Syria or Hizballah might take. A measure of "preventive maintenance" with Syria—in particular, communication via various channels, as seen in visits to Damascus by Powell and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs William Burns in May and August 2003, respectively—could go a long way toward shaping those actions.

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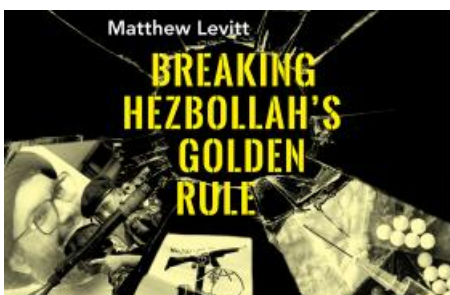
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