

The Hidden Threat in the Mideast

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It's no surprise that the Israeli killing of wanted Hamas militant Salah Shehada and members of his family has drawn the world's attention. It is graphic and it reminds everyone of a seemingly endless struggle. But, having just returned from the Middle East, I am struck by a burgeoning danger that is receiving scant attention. With a constant stream of supply from both the Iranians and Syrians, Hezbollah is building a formidable arsenal of highly mobile rockets.

Longer-range Katyushas are the mainstay of the arsenal, but the Syrians are supplementing these weapons with the Syrian 270 mm rocket.

Destabilizing

What makes these rockets so potentially de-stabilizing is their range. The rockets Hezbollah used to possess could only threaten the immediate border area of northern Israel. While bad enough from an Israeli perspective, the new rockets have ranges stretching over 70 kilometers. Israel's industrial area below Haifa will now be within the sights of Hezbollah rocketeers. Does anyone think Israel will tolerate such attacks? Can there be any doubt, should one be fired, that Israel would go after not only Hezbollah but Syria as well?

Hafez Assad was no slouch when it came to threatening Israel. But he controlled the flow of Iranian arms to Hezbollah, and he never provided Syrian weapons directly. He certainly did not mind Hezbollah keeping the pressure on Israel, but he was not about to let Hezbollah drag him into a war with Israel either.

But Bashar Assad seems to lack his father's sense of limits. As if providing weapons to Hezbollah was not enough, he is also procuring spare parts for Iraq from Eastern Europe. That's something new: His father sought Saddam Hussein's demise, not his strengthening.

What could the younger Mr. Assad be thinking? The logic is difficult to grasp unless one looks at the increasingly close connection he has been developing with Hezbollah and Iran. Iranian officials routinely stop in Damascus both before and after visiting Hezbollah leader Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah. Iran is pushing Hezbollah to cooperate more with Hamas in the war against Israel. Recently, the Israelis have arrested Hezbollah operatives in the West Bank.

Iran is also pushing Hamas very hard to continue the suicide bombings in Israel. As I heard from Israelis and

Palestinians, recent efforts by the Palestinian Authority officials in Gaza to convince Hamas to stop terror attacks against Israelis appeared to be making headway until the Hamas leadership in Gaza got explicit instructions from the Hamas leadership outside with considerable Iranian pressure to persist with the bombings. The same was true for the Islamic Jihad, whose leader Ramadan Shallah resides in Damascus and was equally insistent that the bombing must continue.

Iran and Syria clearly want the conflict to continue between Israelis and Palestinians. Perhaps they believe Israel will lose its resolve and gradually be weakened to the point of collapse. They seem prepared to fight to the last Palestinian to produce such an eventuality. Perhaps they fear American determination to go after Saddam Hussein, believing if he goes, they will be next. Their reasoning might be that the more the situation between Israelis and Palestinians embroils the region, the less the U.S. will be capable of going after Saddam.

While plausible, neither of these explanations can account for the buildup of longer-range rockets in southern Lebanon. Perhaps here we can see another connection to their fears of American military action to replace Saddam. Just as Saddam tried to transform the war in 1991 away from being the international community against Iraq into an Arab-Israeli conflict, it is possible that Iran, Syria and Hezbollah believe that a second front must be opened up once the U.S. begins to act against Saddam. If they cannot head the action off, they might hope to make it more difficult to sustain with a second front.

What can be done to avert the opening of a second front, with dangerous escalating possibilities? A good place to start is by recognizing the danger and beginning to call attention to it. This may be most helpful in Lebanon. Hezbollah could justify its war against Israel and gain considerable support from Lebanese when the Israelis occupied southern Lebanon. But they withdrew, and Hezbollah received enormous credit for driving the Israelis out. They won't receive much now if they provoke Israeli responses that are likely to make all Lebanese suffer.

On the contrary, Hezbollah could easily threaten its Lebanese agenda if it looks like it is now serving non-Lebanese interests. Already, Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri has been critical of Hezbollah; the Europeans, Egyptians and Saudis could do much to reinforce that criticism.

With Mr. Assad, it is more complicated. He seems to like drawing attention to himself. Perhaps more quiet entreaties could make a difference. First and foremost, he should understand that he is playing with fire and likely to be burned. He should not count on a second front being limited to Lebanon. He should not count on Mr. Sharon being limited in his response if the Israeli industrial heartland is attacked. And he should not count on the outside world stepping in to save him if he gets in trouble.

Iranians

As for the Iranians, both private and public approaches are in order. Privately, the European Union should make it clear that its renewed engagement policy will be halted if the Iranians don't act now to stop both the arms buildup and Hezbollah and Hamas efforts to provoke a wider conflict with Israel. For our part, we need to recognize that there is currently great disquiet in Iran. This week and last, thousands have demonstrated and clashed with police in Tehran. Only two weeks ago a leading mullah Ayatollah Jalaledin Taheri of Isfahan resigned with a blistering attack on the mullahs for their irresponsible rule and their indifference to the economic suffering of most Iranians.

While Iranians protest their low pay and poor working conditions, this is a good time to reach out to the Iranian public with the facts: The Khamenei leadership thwarts reform and cannot find the money to invest in Iran's needs, but it has no difficulty spending scarce resources to promote death and destruction in the region. Perhaps one way to embolden the reformers in Iran and raise the costs of irresponsible behavior to the mullahs is to make a public effort now to expose their dangerous game. Better now than waiting until there is a second front. ❖

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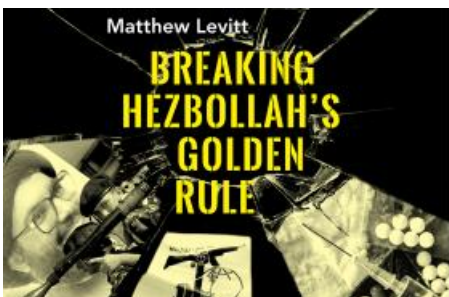
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