



Is Israel Facing War with Hizbullah and Syria?

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- Concerns about Israeli hostilities with Hizbullah are nothing new, but based on recent pronouncements from Syria, if the situation degenerates, fighting could take on a regional dimension not seen since 1973.
- On February 26, Syrian President Bashar Assad hosted [Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) and Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Damascus. Afterward, Hizbullah's online magazine *Al Intiqad* suggested that war with Israel was on the horizon.
- Raising tensions further are reports that Syria has provided Hizbullah with the advanced, Russian-made, shoulder-fired, Igla-S anti-aircraft missile, which could inhibit Israeli air operations over [Lebanon](#) in a future conflict. The transfer of this equipment had previously been defined by Israeli officials as a "red line."
- In the summer of 2006, Syria sat on the sidelines as Hizbullah fought Israel to a standstill. After the war, Assad, who during the fighting received public assurances from then-Prime Minister Olmert that Syria would not be targeted, took credit for the "divine victory."
- Damascus' support for "resistance" was on full display at the Arab Summit in Libya in late March 2010, where Assad urged Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas to abandon U.S.-supported negotiations and "take up arms against Israel."
- After years of diplomatic isolation, Damascus has finally broken the code to Europe, and appears to be on the verge of doing so with the Obama administration as well. Currently, Syria appears to be in a position where it can cultivate its ties with the West without sacrificing its support for terrorism.

In February 2010, tensions spiked between Israel and its northern neighbors. First, Syrian and Israeli officials engaged in a war of words, complete with dueling threats of regime change and targeting civilian populations. Weeks later, Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah pledged to go toe-to-toe with Israel in the next war.¹ Then, toward the end of the month, Israel began military maneuvers in the north. Finally, on February 26, Syrian President Bashar Assad hosted Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Nasrallah for an unprecedented dinner meeting in Damascus.

Concerns about Israeli hostilities with Hizbullah are nothing new, but based on recent pronouncements from Damascus, if the situation degenerates, fighting could take on a regional dimension not seen since 1973. In January and February, Syrian officials indicated that, unlike during the 2006 fighting in Lebanon, Damascus would not "sit idly by" in the next war.² While these statements may be bravado, it's not difficult to imagine Syria being drawn into the conflict.

The Israeli government has taken steps to alleviate tensions, including, most prominently, Prime Minister Netanyahu issuing a gag order forbidding his ministers to discuss Syria.³ Still, the situation in the north remains volatile. Within a three-day span in mid-March: the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) fired at Israeli jets violating Lebanese airspace;⁴ four Lebanese nationals were charged with spying for Israel against Hizbullah;⁵ and Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that the Shiite militia was "building up its forces north of the Litani (river)." Currently, according to Ashkenazi, the border was calm, "but this can change."⁶

It's easy to see how the situation could deteriorate. Hizbullah retaliation against Israel for the 2008 assassination of its military leader Imad Mugniyyeh could spark a war. So could Hizbullah firing missiles in retribution for an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. The transfer of sensitive Syrian technology to the Shiite militia could also prompt an Israeli strike. Regrettably, even if Israel continues to try and diffuse tensions in the north, given the central role Tehran has in determining Hizbullah policy, a third Lebanon war may be inevitable.

Martyrs Month Pronouncements

In mid-February, Hizbullah held the annual commemoration for its pantheon of heroes, a week of celebrations marking the organization's top three martyrs - founding father Ragheb Harb, Secretary General Abbas Mussawi, and

military leader Imad Mugniyyeh. On February 16 - Martyred Leaders Day - Nasrallah gave a speech where he defined a new, more aggressive posture toward Israel, upping the ante in the militia's longstanding "balance of terror" strategy. Promising parity with Israeli strikes on Lebanon, Nasrallah threatened:

If you [Israel] bomb Rafik Hariri international airport in Beirut, we will bomb Ben-Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. If you bomb our docks, we will bomb your docks. If you bomb our oil refineries, we will bomb your oil refineries. If you bomb our factories, we will bomb your factories. And if you bomb our power plants, we will bomb your power plants.⁷

With current estimates suggesting that Hizbullah now possesses in excess of 40,000 missiles and rockets, Nasrallah's threats have some resonance. Raising tensions further are reports that Syria has provided Hizbullah with the advanced, Russian-made, shoulder-fired, Igla-S anti-aircraft missile, which could inhibit Israeli air operations over Lebanon in a future conflict.⁸ The transfer of this equipment had previously been defined by Israeli officials as a "red line."⁹ It is unclear whether such a transgression remains a *casus belli*.

In addition to laying out Hizbullah's new targeting strategy, Nasrallah also discussed his yet unfulfilled pledge to retaliate against Israel for the 2008 killing of Mugniyyeh. Two years ago, immediately after the assassination, Nasrallah declared an "open war" against Israel, swearing vengeance for the group's martyred leader. However, to date, the militia's attempts to strike Israeli targets - in Azerbaijan and [Turkey](#) - have failed.¹⁰ During his speech, Nasrallah reiterated Hizbullah's commitment to retaliate. "Our options are open and we have all the time in the world," he said, adding, "What we want is a revenge that rises to the level of Imad Mugniyyeh."¹¹

The Damascus "Resistance" Summit

In recent years, meetings between Assad and Ahmadinejad have been routine occurrences. It has also been customary for senior Syrian and Iranian officials to visit their respective capitals - and to sign defense or economic agreements - immediately following meetings between the Assad regime and U.S. officials. So it came as little surprise that Ahmadinejad arrived in Damascus just days after Undersecretary of State William Burns departed the Syrian capital. The surprising part about his visit was that Hassan Nasrallah joined the presidents for dinner.

On the day before Nasrallah's visit, Assad and Ahmadinejad made great efforts to demonstrate that Washington's transparent efforts to drive a wedge between the thirty-year strategic allies had failed. In a press conference on February 25, Assad famously mocked U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and the administration's gambit to split Syria from Iran, announced the end of visa requirements for travel between the two states, and described "support for the resistance [a]s a moral and national duty in every nation, and also a [religious] legal duty."¹² He also said that he discussed with his Iranian counterpart "how to confront Israeli terrorism."

While the Syria-Iran bilateral meeting and subsequent press conference was described in some detail by Assad regime insider Ibrahim Humaydi in the pan-Arab daily *Al Hayat*, far less is known about what Assad, Ahmadinejad, and Nasrallah discussed during their dinner meeting the next day. According to the account in Hizbullah's online magazine *Al Intiqad*, the meeting was about "the escalating strategic response of the axis of the confrontationist, rejectionist, and resistance states" to the U.S.-Israeli threat.¹³ Significantly, this article also suggested that war with Israel was on the horizon.

Resorting to the most extreme decision - that is, launching and setting a war on its path - will decide the final results. In any case, if reasonable calculations prevail, they will lead to producing comprehensive and specific [Israeli] compromises or it will lead to postponing the war which still waits for its most appropriate time for everyone.¹⁴

Based on its analysis of the trilateral summit in Damascus, this Hizbullah organ seems to be suggesting that a war, while not imminent, is inevitable.

The Weak Link

In the summer of 2006, Syria sat on the sidelines as Hizbullah fought Israel to a standstill. After the war, Assad, who during the fighting received public assurances from then-Prime Minister Olmert that Syria would not be targeted, took credit for the "divine victory."¹⁵ Since then, Syria has upgraded its rhetorical and materiel support for the Shiite militia.¹⁶ Damascus has helped Hizbullah to fully rearm, reportedly providing the militia with cutting-edge Russian weaponry from its own stocks. In this context, Syrian officials have been increasingly trumpeting their support for, and loyalty to, the resistance, so much so that the official government-controlled Syrian press now proclaims that "Syrian foreign policy depends on supporting the resistance."¹⁷

Damascus' support for "resistance" was on full display at the Arab Summit in Libya in late March 2010. According to reports, at the meeting Assad urged Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to abandon U.S.-supported negotiations and "take up arms against Israel," imparting his own experience that "the price of resistance is not higher than the price of peace."¹⁸ During his speech before his fellow Arab leaders, Assad was equally hard-line in his prescriptions. At a minimum, he said, Arab states should cut off their relations with Israel. The "maximum" - and presumably preferable - policy option, he said, would be to support the resistance.¹⁹

Despite the rhetoric, however, it's not clear that Syria is presently itching for a fight with Israel. After years of diplomatic isolation, Damascus has finally broken the code to Europe, and appears to be on the verge of doing so with the Obama administration, which recently announced the posting of a new ambassador and indicated a

willingness to revise sanctions and modify U.S. economic pressures on Damascus.²⁰ Currently, Syria appears to be in a position where it can cultivate its ties with the West without sacrificing its support for terrorism.

War would change this comfortable dynamic. In the event of an Israel-Hizbullah conflagration, pressures on Syria to participate would be intense. Furthermore, could Syria really watch an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities without responding? After so much crowing about its support for Hizbullah and its regional ilk, could Syria sit out yet another fight?

Conclusion

While it's too early to predict the timing or the trigger, on Israel's northern border there appears to be a growing sense that war is coming. Iran may have an interest in maintaining Hizbullah's arsenal until an Israeli strike. Likewise, for Hizbullah, which lately has been playing up its Lebanese identity in an effort to improve its image at home, waging war on Israel on behalf of Iran could be problematic. In any event, it is all but assured that a war on Israel's northern front will be determined, at least in part, by Tehran.

In early February, Israeli Minister of Defense Ehud Barak told the IDF: "In the absence of an arrangement with Syria, we are liable to enter a belligerent clash with it that could reach the point of an all-out, regional war."²¹ Regrettably, regardless of what happens between Syria and Israel in the coming months, the decision of war or peace with Hizbullah may be out of Israel's hands.

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Notes

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1. "Full Text of H.E. Sayyed Nasrallah Speech on Day of Martyred Leaders," <http://english.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=10225&cid=214>.
2. "Syria Will Back Hizbullah Against IDF," *Jerusalem Post*, January 6, 2010. Foreign Minister Walid Muallem echoed this threat in February 2010; see "Al-Mouallem at Press Conference with Moratinos," *SANA*, February 4, 2010. <http://www.sana.sy/eng/21/2010/02/04/270781.htm>.
3. Attila Somfalvi, "Bibi Tells Ministers to Keep Mum on Syria," *Ynet*, February 4, 2010. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3844619,00.html>. Netanyahu also reassured Syria that Israel remained interested in peace.
4. "Lebanese Army Fires on Israeli Warplanes," *AFP*, March 21, 2010. <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/world/view/20100321-260030/Lebanese-army-fires-on-Israeli-warplanes>.
5. "Lebanon Charges Four with Spying for Israel," *Press TV*, March 20, 2010. <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=121274&ionid=351020203>.
6. Amnon Meranda, "Ashkenazi: Hamas Doesn't Want a Flareup," *Ynet*, March 23, 2010. <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3866883,00.html>.
7. "Nasrallah Speech on Day of Martyred Leaders."
8. See, for example, Barak Ravid, "Israel Warns Hizbullah: We Won't Tolerate Arms Smuggling," *Ha'aretz*, October 12, 2008. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1009384.html>.
9. "Report: Hizbullah Trains on Missiles," *UPI*, January 17, 2010. http://www.upi.com/Top_News/International/2010/01/17/Report-Hezbollah-trains-on-missiles/UPI-51221263741141/.
10. See Yossi Melman, "Hizbullah, Iran Plotted Bombing of Israeli Embassy in Azerbaijan," *Ha'aretz*, May 31, 2009. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1089204.html>. Also Avi Isaacharoff, "Turkish Forces Foil Attack on Israeli Target," *Ha'aretz*, December 9, 2009. <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1133747.html>.
11. "Nasrallah Speech on Day of Martyred Leaders."
12. Ibrahim Humaydi, "Al Asad: Ta'ziz al-'alaqat bayna duwal al-mintaqa tariq wahid li-l-qarar al mustaqill," *Al Hayat*, February 26, 2010. <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/112984>.
13. "Qimmat Nejad-Al-Asad-Nasrallah: Ayy hisabat ba'daha?" <http://www.alintiqad.com/essaydetails.php?eid=27878&cid=4>.
14. *Ibid.*
15. "Speech of Bashar Asad at Journalist Union 4th Conference," August 15, 2006. <http://www.golan67.net/NEWS/president%20Assad%20Speech%2015-8-6.htm>.
16. In addition to the Igla-S anti-aircraft missile, some unconfirmed reports indicate that Syria may have transferred some of its Scud-D missiles - capable of delivering chemical warheads - to Hizbullah.
17. "Junblatt wa-l-Tariq ila Dimashq," *Al Watan*, March 10, 2010. <http://alwatan.sy/dindex.php?idn=75718>. That support for resistance is central to Syrian foreign policy comes as little surprise: in 2009, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem volunteered to join Hizbullah. See "Muallem Says He's Ready to Join Hizbullah," *Gulf News*, May 3, 2009. <http://gulfnews.com/news/region/lebanon/muallem-says-ready-to-join-hezbollah-1.248887>.
18. "Arab Leaders Support Peace Plan," *AP*, March 28, 2010. <http://www.jpost.com/middleeast/article.aspx?id=171981>.
19. Ziyad Haydar, "Qimmat sirte infaddat 'ala 'ajal...wa bila za'al," *As Safir*, March 29, 2010. <http://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?ArticleId=3020&EditionId=1496&ChannelId=34736>. In an interview following the summit,

Syrian advisor Buthaina Sha'ban declared victory for the Syrian position, saying that "an agreement took place among the Arab leaders in a closed session to support the resistance and reject normalization" with Israel.

20. Ibrahim Humaydi, "Washington tarfa' mu'aradataha 'udwiyat Suriya fi munazzimat al-tijara al-'alamiya," *Al Hayat*, February 24, 2010, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/112646>.

21. Amos Harel, "Barak: Without Peace We Could Be Headed for All-Out War," *Ha'aretz*, February 2, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/1146731.html>.