



WARS AND RUMORS OF WAR: THE LEVANTINE TINDERBOX

Antony T. Sullivan

Dr. Sullivan is president of the consulting firm Near East Support Services. He holds an honorary position as associate at the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the University of Michigan.

A recent extended visit to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt leaves little room for optimism about the geopolitical stability of the Levant or the likelihood of Middle East peace. Most Arabs believe that more bad times are coming to the region, including another Israeli-Hezbollah war, which many now expect to erupt as early as the summer of 2008. The assassination on February 12, 2008, of Imad Mughniyyah, Hezbollah's chief of military operations and its most powerful figure, was a dramatic escalation that has altered the calculations of all the players in the region.¹ In fact, one astute analyst in the area states that the Mughniyyah assassination had a "clear Israeli touch," and may be the "opening salvo in the next Israeli-Hezbollah war." As early as February 5, 2008, tensions along the Lebanese-Israeli border were already rising as a result of the killing by Israeli troops of a Lebanese drug smuggler working on behalf of Hezbollah and collecting intelligence on its behalf within Israel. To all of this, sources in the Middle East believe that Hezbollah will be obliged to respond, probably in a major way. Any new conflict between Hezbollah and Israel will almost certainly harm all of the states between the eastern Mediterranean

and Iran and will have a disastrous impact on U.S. national interests. Lights should be burning late in Washington as planners develop alternative scenarios for how best to contain any new and perhaps broader conflict in the Fertile Crescent.

Despite wars, political paralysis and economic shocks, Lebanon seems to possess a unique ability to muddle through crises that might tear other countries apart. Time spent in the *Dahiya*, Lebanon's heavily Shiite southern suburbs, revealed a substantial degree of recovery from the enormous destruction inflicted by Israeli bombing during the 2006 war. Today there are only two egregious reminders of the infrastructural damage from 34 days of relentless combat. In one case, there is nothing but a crater some 75 yards square and perhaps 20 feet deep, where Hezbollah's headquarters were once located. A number of large buildings adjoin this crater and remain standing, but their interiors are gutted, and they will surely have to be demolished if reconstruction proceeds. Not far away, another enormous crater is all that remains on the spot where Hezbollah traditionally held large rallies and from which Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's titular leader, was once accustomed to



speak. In 2006, Israel apparently concentrated on destroying Hezbollah's political and military command center in Beirut, on the one hand, and its primary religious gathering place, on the other. Israel attacked both the fact and symbol of Hezbollah's presence in Lebanon, as well as many civilian targets that had nothing to do with Hezbollah. But the organization has recovered militarily and is now considerably more powerful than it was in 2006. Hezbollah may now be in a position to play kingmaker in Lebanon. At the least, nothing is likely to transpire without its approval.

Although a major rebuilding effort in the Dahiya immediately followed the 2006 war, reconstruction efforts have now come almost to a standstill. Since most expect a resumption of

hostilities, rebuilding is currently confined largely to renovation of damaged apartments. Destroyed buildings are not being rebuilt. Nevertheless, well-off Shiite merchants (unlike the impoverished Shiite majority) who had their homes or shops destroyed have rebuilt them or purchased new ones. If left alone, Lebanon does appear able to again become an economic hub of the Middle East. And that is one of many reasons why it will not be left alone, either by Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Israel, France or the United States, most of which have their proxies within Lebanon.

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Lebanese keep a weather eye cocked toward the south, whence they believe the next major tempest is most likely to come. That storm is expected to rage most intensely in the Beqaa Valley, which has become Hezbollah's main power base since it at least temporarily lost control of the south.

For Lebanese as well as other Arabs, the belief that Israel will invade the country again, this time with an army of perhaps 50,000 troops specifically trained in anti-guerrilla warfare, has almost become an article of faith. Syria and Hezbollah, in particular, appear convinced of this, and

each is making due preparations.

Syria is now reported to be operating under the assumption that Israel will attack. The Syrians have deployed additional troops on the Golan Heights which are said to be densely

dug in between the cease-fire line and the southwestern outskirts of Damascus. Moreover, they have bunkered a large number of tanks and artillery along the ceasefire line. Syria is said to be spending \$600 million on this military redeployment.

Reports from Damascus suggest that there is a split in the Syrian leadership as to whether Syria should launch an offensive. Those supporting war argue that, although Syria would almost certainly lose, the regime would survive because Israel is afraid to do anything that might precipitate its fall, given the probability that any replacement would be far worse. In addition, those favoring an aggressive posture are convinced that a Syrian-Israeli war would galvanize Arab support and end Syria's virtual isolation in the Arab world.

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However, these arguments have not carried the day in Damascus, and currently the Syrian redeployment seems entirely defensive. At least in the immediate future, Syria is most unlikely to escalate the situation along the cease-fire lines in the Golan.

Whatever the case, Syria is demonstrating a determination to make a war with Israel last far longer than Israel would like and to impose costs on the Israeli population that would prove too onerous to bear. In addition to its surface fortifications, Syria is now constructing a network of underground bunkers that are reported to replicate Hezbollah's, except that the Syrian installations are much more comprehensive. Iran's engineering corps is directing this project.

These underground and largely self-sufficient fortifications are reported to aim at providing the means for continuous resistance to a major Israeli thrust toward Damascus, which the Syrian army, despite its impressive surface defenses, would not be able to stop. The underground facilities will allow the Syrians to continue to shell Israeli positions and population centers to raise the cost of an Israeli offensive beyond the threshold of tolerance of the Israeli public. The Syrians are stockpiling a staggering arsenal of newly acquired missiles in these underground bunkers that can reach every corner of Israel.

Israelis understand that war with Syria automatically means war against Hezbollah, and local analysts believe that Israel is now accelerating its preparations to deal with Hezbollah. Israelis know that war with Syria means massive Palestinian intervention by such pro-Syrian groups as the well-trained Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)-General Command (based in Damascus), and that Hamas will certainly not

remain quiet. In addition, and despite recent political tensions with Damascus over how independent Syria's foreign policy can be, Iran would have little alternative but to come to Syria's assistance should war break out. Despite all this, the consensus now on the Arab street is that the summer of 2008 will most certainly not be a good one for tourism.

Despite all its military preparations, Syria evidently remains eager for renewed negotiations with Israel over the Golan Heights and with the United States over Lebanon and the Hariri tribunal investigating the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Under the auspices of Turkey, there have been back-channel exchanges between Syria and Israel that many believe have now reached an advanced stage of agreement. Sources in the region state that almost all issues pertaining to geography, politics and security have been resolved. Only a face-saving mechanism for Syria remains to be found before an agreement can be announced. Sadly, the United States has tried to persuade Turkey to curtail all such mediation. Nevertheless, reports from Beirut indicate that Hezbollah is genuinely concerned about the possibility of a political deal between Israel and Syria. Naim Qassem, Hassan Nasrallah's hardline deputy, who has recently usurped much of Nasrallah's authority, is worried about such a deal and is using his best efforts to prevent any further progress.

Perhaps in order to better its relations with both the United States and Israel, rumor in Damascus has it that the Syrian government is now beginning to revise its school curriculum to remove anti-Israeli remarks. Moreover, it is said to be excising all references to Western colonialism. If true, this reported curricular revision would



represent a radical ideological change, since Syria previously has refused to bow to strong American pressure on this issue.

Even more interesting in regard to an apparent change in Syrian policy, a Lebanese military source reported in late December 2007 that Syria had recently arrested three high-ranking Syrian army officers suspected of involvement in the 2005 Hariri assassination: Jamea Jamea, a former Syrian intelligence official in Lebanon; Said Rabah, a Syrian intelligence officer in north Lebanon; and (perhaps most interesting) Ghassan Bilal, director of the office of Maher al-Asad,

brother of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. In addition, a fourth individual who stands accused of involvement in the Hariri assassination has had a very serious "automobile accident" and is reported to be in

critical condition. His chances for recovery are probably not good. The purpose of all of this may be to demonstrate, especially to the United States, that Syria is at last taking responsibility for the elimination of Hariri.

Meanwhile, Syria is struggling with serious problems of internal dissent. Competition among Syrian security officials is reported to have become intense, with Asef Shawkat, President Asad's brother-in-law, holding the upper hand over Maher al-Asad, commander of the Republican Guard. Shawkat has appointed Brigadier General Said Sammur, a close aide, to a sensitive security position where he is now collaborating with Mufid Shawkat, Maher al-Asad's

brother. Asef Shawkat also appears to have succeeded in penetrating the Republican Guard command. Maher al-Asad accuses Shawkat of being a French agent and also of collaborating with Syrian opposition leaders in Europe. Meanwhile, Rustum Ghazale, who previously commanded Syrian military intelligence in Lebanon, has been placed under house arrest, along with Colonel Samih al-Qashmai and other security officials who formerly served under Ghazale's command in Lebanon. In addition, Syria has been reshuffling its security apparatus

throughout the country, transferring non-Alawite officers from sensitive urban areas to isolated villages (this may have contributed to the Syrian security breakdown that led to Imad

Mughniyyah's assassination). In sum, a quiet civil war seems to be ongoing in Damascus.

Furthermore, reports from Syria indicate that clashes are continuing between rebellious army units and the Syrian general command. In most cases, the rebellious units have been annihilated with only minor losses to the Syrian army. These clashes appear to have been especially frequent in the north near the Turkish border. In September 2007, a number of Syrian officers were arrested on suspicion of assisting the rebels. These officers included Mustafa al-Tawil, Ahmad Qasemlou (a Kurd), Riad Lutfi Abdul Aziz, Ayman al-Atassi, Haydar Ahmad Murad,

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and Yamin Haydar. One rather doubts the military effectiveness of the Syrian army, given all the hot-and-cold internecine conflicts that seem to be the order of the day in the country.

Neither fear of Israel nor domestic turbulence has led the Syrians to ignore Lebanon. Asef Shawkat is reported to have warned the Lebanese government that the trouble caused by Fatah al-Islam, a Sunni fundamentalist group, in Nahr al-Barid during the summer of 2007 is only a sample of what the regime in Damascus can do in Lebanon if its government adopts a hostile stance toward Syria. Fatah al-Islam has a number of sleeper cells in Lebanon, and its militants are now infiltrating the Biddawi Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon and the Burj al-Baranjah camp in south Beirut, where they operate under the control of the PFLP-General Command. In addition, Syria and Iran are reported by German intelligence to be logistically supporting some 30 al-Qaeda sleeper cells in Beirut and more in the Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp. The Ain al-Hilweh cells are now targeting the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Also, the PFLP-General Command has consolidated its position in the Burj al-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp, located in Beirut's southern suburbs. All of these irregular forces are prepared to undertake terrorist operations against private businesses, embassies and foreign diplomats in Lebanon if and when Damascus gives a green light. Mufid Shawkat is said to have warned the pro-American March 14th coalition that Syria can open four military fronts against it at the same time, and can cause the disintegration of the Lebanese army, the only truly intersectarian, national institution in the

country. The recent assassination by unknown hands of General François Hajj, the Lebanese army's chief of operations, may be a portent of things to come.

At the same time, Syria has not forgotten Iraq. It appears that several branches of Syrian intelligence are trying to enlist the support of Iraqi refugees now living in Syria for military service in Iraq. Iraqis willing to work with Syrian intelligence are promised financial support, while military training of Iraqis is now being conducted in the desert between Homs and Palmyra. The ultimate purpose of this recruitment seems to be to use the Iraqis as military combatants in southern Iraq. It appears that Syria and Iran may be planning to open a new front against the American army in Iraq, in the now unlikely event of any American or Israeli attack on Iran.

Meanwhile, questions swirl around what designs Russia may have on the Syrian naval bases at Tartus and Latakia. On August 8, 2007, the commander of the Russian navy announced the need for Russia to maintain a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean. This observation should be taken seriously: Russia's lease with Ukraine to use Sevastopol as a naval base will expire in 2017, and the Russians are reported to be desperate for an alternative base, simply because they have no friends in the Black Sea basin. Shortly before the 1967 Six Day War, the Russians sent about 50 ships into the eastern Mediterranean and used the naval facilities in Tartus and Latakia, as well as in Alexandria, Egypt, to support them. Although the Russians conducted dredging operations at Tartus and Latakia during 2006, their presence there remains minimal.

The Syrians, however, are said to believe that they have gone out of their way to cooperate with the United States in



the war against terrorism, but the United States has treated them with contempt and has kept asking for more without giving them anything in return. If Washington pushes Syria too far, knowledgeable observers predict, the Asad regime may find itself compelled to do something dramatic, up to and including granting Russia full naval facilities at the two ports.

Even if Syria were to grant Russia such permission, geostrategic analysts believe that the result would be unlikely to compromise the U.S. naval presence in the Mediterranean or even pose a serious threat to it. In fact, a Russian fleet in the Mediterranean, they argue, would probably become a hostage of the United States and Israel because it would lack air cover. All things considered, the Syrians are probably not serious about granting the Russians full base privileges. However, in early 2008, they did express disappointment to Moscow that Russia had refused to use the port of Tartus in recent maneuvers. Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Sultanov hastened to Damascus to explain that any such use would probably have produced a severe reaction from both the United States and Israel. Apparently, Syria had hoped that Russian use of Tartus might alarm Washington sufficiently to persuade it to open serious negotiations with Damascus.

As for Hezbollah, the backbone of its forces is now reported to be concentrated in the northern Beqaa Valley, well to the north of the Beirut-Damascus road, which Hezbollah expects Israel to cross in any new invasion. Hezbollah has developed a variety of defenses in the northern Beqaa. Most notably, it has purchased a great deal of land in the hills above Baalbek- Hermil and has constructed a network of tunnels, bunkers and military bases there. In fact,

this region has become a closed military zone, even to shepherds: recently, two were arrested and accused of being Israeli spies. In addition, Hezbollah has deployed new long-range missiles there and elsewhere that are able to reach Israel. If Israel permits itself to become involved in an extended guerrilla war in Lebanon, it is clear that the results are likely to be unpleasant both for Israeli soldiers in the field and Israelis within Israel. Such results seem especially likely since Hezbollah has built a massive defensive line north of the Litani River, in the western Beqaa, which is designed to permit the use of armor. This effort, like most other Hezbollah activities, has been supervised by Iranian military personnel. Since Hezbollah has no tanks, many believe that Syria may commit armor to this defensive line if it believes that the Israelis might push into Syria through that area. South of the Litani, Hezbollah has succeeded in infiltrating hundreds of fighters and, early in 2008, began to attempt to introduce heavy military equipment within the areas of UNIFIL operation. Evidently, Hezbollah is now determined to openly violate the terms of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701. For some time Hezbollah has been rebuilding its positions and communications systems below the Litani, especially inside villages. UNIFIL no longer searches for weapons depots but simply reports violations to the Lebanese army, which does nothing.

Furthermore, Hezbollah is reported to have transformed the city of Tyre, which lies outside the UNIFIL mandate and has only a token Lebanese army presence, into a rocket-launching base. Many Lebanese believe that Hezbollah's strategy south of the Litani is to transform UNIFIL and the whole population of Tyre into hostages in the event of an all-out confrontation with



Israel. For security purposes, Hezbollah is now using Egyptian Nubians to operate its communication systems south of the Litani. These Nubians are reported to be communicating Hezbollah messages in the unwritten Nubian language, which is said not to be understood by Israel, the Lebanese army or UNIFIL. Sudan is apparently facilitating this initiative, and strong ties have been established between Sudanese and Hezbollah security officials.

Today, Hezbollah owns many apartments in West Beirut and has heavily armed fighters deployed throughout the city. These forces are

equipped with state-of-the-art communication gear and report to a commander codenamed Abu Jafar. Their assignment is to provide protection for Hezbollah demonstrators, should Hezbollah

again decide to go into the streets to force the collapse of the Siniora government. In sum, Iran and Syria may now have created a shadow government in Beirut, in fact if not in name. Certainly, they have checkmated any attempt to disarm Hezbollah by force.

The importance of the assassination of Imad Mughniyyah cannot be overstated. A Lebanese once deeply involved in the taking of American hostages and a variety of other terrorist operations, Mughniyyah had been playing a crucial role in preparing Hezbollah for the next round of hostilities with Israel, a fact of which Israel had long been fully aware. Mughniyyah had taken control of Hezbollah's major strategic and military

decisions in Lebanon, as well as its foreign operations, with Nasrallah reduced to little more than a figurehead. Nicknamed *al-thalab* (the wolf), Mughniyyah had been working closely with Iranian intelligence and had been overseeing the establishment of Shiite cells in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain tasked to operate against the United States and pro-American Arabs in the event of war with Iran. He had also been supervising Hezbollah operatives in Nigeria, the Ivory Coast and elsewhere in West Africa. Hezbollah's reach is now worldwide, stretching from the Philippines,

Indonesia and Malaysia (where it is active in the narcotics trade) to Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina. In fact, Mughniyyah, assisted by Naim Qassem and Wafiq Safa, had emerged as the real head of Hezbollah.

Mughniyyah's very large shoes will be hard to fill.

In addition to the loss of Mughniyyah, Hezbollah, like the Syrians, has significant political problems. In Baalbek, the hinge of the northern Beqaa, half of the inhabitants are Sunnis who have little love for either Shiites or Iran. Currently, there is great dissatisfaction with Hezbollah in the city. In part, this is because Hezbollah has insisted on hanging a large number of Iranian flags at the city's entrances. Huge posters of Khomeini and Khamenei are so omnipresent that many visitors are said to feel that they are entering an Iranian city. In addition, Hezbollah has established a permanent museum in the Baalbek castle plaza dedi-

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cated to the "resistance." All of this has hurt tourism badly. Indeed, Baalbek has lost some 70 percent of its international visitors, a major economic blow to the region.

Mughniyyah's elimination was only one of two dramatic developments in Lebanon during the harsh winter of 2007-08. Only days earlier, the political dynamics in the country were significantly altered. On January 27, the Lebanese army opened fire on Shiite demonstrators in South Beirut, killing eight. Hezbollah operatives themselves are said to have provoked this confrontation. Whatever the case, the opposition had finally found a credible excuse for the political escalation it had long sought. Indeed, it is said to regard the incident of January 27 as a "divine gift." The grim result is that Iran, Syria and Hezbollah are now reportedly refusing any political compromise whatsoever with the Siniora government or its American, French and Saudi backers.

For its part, Hezbollah has apparently decided to bring the Lebanese political system to a complete halt. Specifically, the opposition may now have vetoed the selection of Lebanese Armed Forces commander General Michael Suleiman, with whom tensions have significantly increased, as Lebanon's next president. General Suleiman recently made overtures to the March 14 coalition; these did not go down at all well with Syria and Hezbollah. In fact, the bonds crafted by Syria between the Lebanese army

and Hezbollah are now rapidly eroding. If Suleiman no longer has a chance for the presidency, another candidate potentially acceptable to all factions will not easily be found. Certainly for Hezbollah, the best Lebanon is a president-less Lebanon. Cantonization of the country appears to be deepening. An astute analyst in Beirut observed early in 2008: "The situation here is very disturbing. The gap between the March 14 coalition and the opposition and their foreign patrons is now unbridgeable. I expect the failure of all mediation efforts and believe a showdown is inevitable. Syria has won the day. And the worst is yet to come."

That worst, most Arabs are more than ever convinced, is likely to include a reprise of the 2006 war. Few in Lebanon doubt that any new Israeli invasion would send shock waves throughout the region. Not only Hezbollah, but al-Qaeda sleeper cells in Lebanon and Jordan would almost certainly be activated. If the United States were to implicitly endorse Israel's action, as it did in 2006, Syria and Iran might release Iraqi guerrillas who were once refugees in Syria, as well as others, to enter the war against America in southern Iraq. Geostrategic instability and political unpredictability across the Fertile Crescent would skyrocket. All such possibilities should cause many a sleepless night in Washington. Israel, Iran, Syria and Hezbollah will certainly remain the determinative regional players around whom the future of the Middle East is likely to revolve.

¹ This article is based on numerous and ongoing discussions with important political and geostrategic players inside and outside of Lebanon. Given the enormous fragility of the situation in the Levant, all interviews have been and are being conducted on the basis of non-attribution.