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Syria as a strategic prop for Hezbollah and Hamas

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Iran-Syria summit meeting: the two countries sponsoring Hezbollah and Hamas. The Syrian president welcomes the Iranian president to Damascus (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, January 20, 2006).

Overview

◆ Syria, along with its ally Iran, is consistently supports Hezbollah and the Palestinian terrorist organizations to attain a variety of strategic goals: **strengthening the radical Iranian-Syrian axis** in the Middle East; **weakening Israel** by tearing apart its social fabric and damaging its economy; **strengthening Syria's influence in Lebanon**; strengthening the radical Islamic forces in the Palestinian Authority; **sabotaging agreements and arrangements in Lebanon and the PA which are incompatible with Syrian and Iranian interests**. In addition, the Syrian leadership regards the weapon of terrorism as a tool to lever its way out of the

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international pressures exerted on Bashad Assad's régime and the renewed initiative of Israeli-Syrian negotiations regarding the Golan Heights.

✦ Part of Syrian strategy includes providing Hezbollah and Hamas with military, political and propaganda support and aiding them in the current confrontations. Syria (and Iran) can also be expected to rehabilitate the terrorist organizations' operational capabilities once the current battles have ended. The Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist organizations Israel is fighting are clearly **Syrian and Iranian proxies**, systematically built up over a period of years in Lebanon and the PA.

✦ Syria and Iran have been characteristically careful **not to involve themselves directly** in Israel's current confrontations with Hezbollah and Hamas. However, behind the scenes, they are attempting to influence the outcome through any and all means of pressure they have at their disposal. Thus in our assessment, **Syria can be expected to exploit its position to influence the diplomatic agreements reached at the end of the fighting.** At the same time, as in the past it will not hesitate to exploit its ability to hamper and even sabotage agreements which it views as contrary to its own interests in the Lebanese, Palestinian or Arab arenas and in the ongoing conflict with Israel.

Syrian support for Hezbollah

✦ When Hezbollah was formed in 1982 and throughout the Lebanese War (1982-1985), Syria viewed it as an important tool in its struggle against Israel. The Syrian régime helped Hezbollah establish itself in the Beka'a Valley in Lebanon and supported it against the IDF and its opponents in Lebanon. Syria also used Hezbollah against the multinational force (which included American, French and Italian units) set up to supervise the evacuation of the Syrian army and the Palestinian terrorists after the Israeli siege of Beirut. Hezbollah proved to be a valuable tool in Syrian strategy, enabling Syria, although it was militarily inferior to Israel, **to bring about the withdrawal of the IDF from Lebanon without a diplomatic agreement, to get the multinational force out of Lebanon** by carrying out lethal terrorist attacks

against American and French targets and **to further impose the “Syrian order” on Lebanon’s internal arena.**

✦ Damascus rewarded Hezbollah for its services by **making it the linchpin when it reinforced Syrian influence in Lebanon after the war.** According to the **Taef Accord** of 1989 (which symbolized the end of the Lebanese civil war), Lebanese government sovereignty was to be enforced throughout the country and all the armed Lebanese and non-Lebanese (i.e., Palestinian) militias were to be disbanded. However, the Syrians **made sure the accord was enforced selectively.** They took care to disarm the Christian and Druze militias while giving their full support to Hezbollah as the only organization with a broad military-operational infrastructure. **That was the turning point in internal Lebanese politics, upsetting the balance between the various ethnic groups. It allowed Hezbollah to become a major player in the internal Lebanese arena and to expand its terrorist activities against Israel.**

✦ **There was a significance change in Syrian-Hezbollah relations** after Bashar Assad took over the Syrian régime in July 2000. In essence, the organization’s status was upgraded in Damascus and from a pawn it became a **strategic partner** and a major player with influence on Syrian policies. Close relations developed between Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and inexperienced, uncharismatic Syrian president Bashar Assad, noteworthy in view of the distance Hafez Assad kept from Hezbollah and his suspicions of it.

✦ Upgrading of the relations between the two was also a function of Damascus’s **strategic weakness** under Bashar Assad, as opposed to Hezbollah’s increasing strength. The weakness of the Syrian régime became pronounced after the murder of Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005, and with the internal Lebanese and international pressures exerted on Syria, **some of whose senior figures were accused of complicity in the murder** (an international commission of enquiry is still examining the affair...). Removing Syrian forces from Lebanon in April 2005, after almost 30 years of occupation, marked a low point in the Syrian régime’s status

in general and in Lebanon in particular, and made Hezbollah even more important in Syrian eyes.

✦ For those reasons, **under Bashar Assad, Syria increased its support** of Hezbollah in the following ways:

✓ **Militarily:** Syria gives the organization military support, **complementing the massive support it receives from Iran.** Syrian support is currently much greater than previously and exceeds the limits imposed by Hafez Assad, as follows:

✦ **Syria serves as a conduit for the massive amounts of weapons the Iranians give Hezbollah.** Iranian arms-bearing planes land in Damascus and from there the weapons are transferred to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The arsenal of Iranian missiles stockpiled by Hezbollah in Lebanon could not exist without Syrian support. Therefore, Iran and Syria can be expected to replenish the arsenal when the current confrontation ends.



Click here for a video clip of an Israeli Air Force strike on trucks carrying weapons after they crossed the Syrian-Lebanese border between July 26 and August 1 (Photo courtesy of the IDF spokesman).

✦ **Direct weapons supplies:** During the past few years Syria has given Hezbollah **200 mm rockets with 80 kg (176 lb) warheads with a range of 70 km (almost 44 miles),² and 302 mm rockets with 100 kg (220 lb) warheads with a potential range of about 100 km (about 62 miles).** In addition, Syria has given Hezbollah advanced anti-tank rockets and missiles and quite probably anti-aircraft missiles as well. It should be noted that during the current confrontation **220 mm rockets hit Haifa**

² According to Israeli security sources, a severe blow has been delivered to Hezbollah's stockpile of 220 mm rockets. Of their original 400 rockets, approximately 200 now remain (Ynet, August 1, 2006).

(and caused most of the damage to life and property), Nazareth and the Jezreel Valley; Afula was hit by 302 mm rockets.



Syrian supply trucks on their way to Lebanon (Al-Manar TV, July 25; Al-Arabiya TV, July 30).



The Beirut-Damascus highway after it was struck by the Israeli Air Force to prevent the transport of weapons to Hezbollah (Al-Jazeera TV, July 31).

◆ **Syrian propaganda** supports the Hezbollah position, identifying with it publicly and expressing satisfaction with its ability to confront Israel. Posters of Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah flags have been hung in the streets of Damascus and demonstrators have carried Nasrallah's picture along with those of Bashar Assad.



A demonstration in support of Hezbollah in front of the American embassy in Damascus (Syrian TV, July 30).

◆ **Politically**, Syria is in favor of an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, **opposes an effective multinational force** which would not receive Lebanese consensus (i.e., Hezbollah would not agree) and rejects the disarmament of Hezbollah. In a meeting the Syrian foreign minister Walid al-Mualem held with foreign diplomats in Damascus, he even permitted himself to use a threatening tone when speaking of the results of a positioning such a force in Lebanon: “[Syria] does not want such forces to meet the same fate met by the multinational force in 1983 if Lebanon does not agree to their being there” (Al-Hayat, August 1).³

³ In February 1984 the multinational force withdrew from Lebanon after a wave of Syrian and Iranian-supported and instigated Hezbollah terrorist attacks against American and French targets in Lebanon in which hundreds of Americans and French were killed.

Conclusion

✦ Under Bashar Assad, Syrian-Iranian policies turned Hezbollah from **an annoying terrorist organization into a strategic threat to both Israel and the stability of the entire region**. The two countries furnished Hezbollah with an arsenal of some 12,000 missiles (including long-range missiles) and gave the organization **the capabilities of a country, the likes of which are possessed by no other terrorist organization in the world, and thus enabled Hezbollah to acquire the ability to cause regional deterioration**. Hezbollah's status has been well illustrated in the current confrontation, which has been unprecedented in scope and severity since the Lebanon War (1982-1985).

✦ In our assessment, Israeli policy makers should take into consideration the fact that Syria and Iran will make an effort to **influence the new reality created at the end of current confrontation and to prevent, insofar as they can, Israel, the United States, the west and the Lebanese government from achieving their goals**. They are liable to try to sabotage any agreement regarded as contrary to their own interests (a multinational force stationed in Lebanon, for example) using their traditional weapon of terrorism. Moreover, what should also be taken into account will be their **coordinated effort to rehabilitate and replenish Hezbollah's operational capabilities**, especially its rocket arsenal, to keep it as a major player in the internal Lebanese arena and facing Israel.

Syrian support for Hamas

✦ Syria provides sponsorship and support for **Hamas**. The movement's **"external" leadership** sits in **Damascus**, where, after it was expelled from Jordan in 1999, it received permission from the Syrian régime to operate from within its borders. **Today, that Damascene "external leadership" is the movement's leading authority**. It traditionally holds **positions more inflexible and extremist** than the

“internal” leadership in the PA, the result of its alienation from the needs of the Palestinian people and its proximity to Iran and Syria.

✦ Head of Hamas’s Damascus leadership are **Khaled Mashal**, chief of the organization’s **political bureau** and his deputy, **Musa Abu Marzuq**, who was deported by the United States. They are aided by members of Hamas’s operational headquarters, led by **‘Imad al-‘Alami**. Bashar Assad’s régime enables them to **direct Hamas policy in the PA from Syria**, including terrorist-operational activity. The **Damascus-based direction and support of terrorist activities** are carried out in a variety of ways: There is an uninterrupted flow of **political and operational instructions** sent to Hamas operatives in the PA; **funds are transferred** in amounts reaching tens of millions of dollars a year; terrorist-operatives are **trained in Syria** and aid is provided to **purchase weapons**, which are then smuggled into the PA and the Arab states.

✦ In the past, primarily because of American and international pressure, from time to time the Syrian régime made its links to Hamas and the other terrorist organizations less visible. However, **during the past two years the régime has defiantly and openly strengthened its ties with Iran and the various terrorist organizations, and has not hesitated to publicly express the fact.**



Khaled Mashal, head of Hamas’s political bureau, and the Syrian foreign minister (Syrian TV, April 12, 2006).

✦ The Syrian régime was openly pleased with the Hamas victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in January 2006 and with the formation of the Hamas

government. Since the January elections, Syria's activity has significantly increased in the Palestinian arena with the hope of **exploiting the new situation to advance its own interests**. That was manifested in several areas:

✓ **Politically**, the Syrian régime increased its coordination and updating meetings with various levels of Hamas representatives, including frequent meetings with **Khaled Mashal** and Assad's media-covered meetings with senior members of the Palestinian government. **All that was done to send the message that Damascus held a "terrorist card," while it formally denied any responsibility for the terrorist attacks carried out in Israel and the PA.**

✓ **With regard to terrorism**, the Syrian régime **encourages the continuation of a terrorist campaign against Israel** and supports the Syrian-based headquarters of Hamas and other terrorist organizations. It is also involved in forming Hamas terrorist policy vis-à-vis the "internal" leadership, **including returning Hamas to the track of terrorist attacks**, as manifested by launching rockets into Israeli territory and abducting IDF soldiers.

✦ To a great extent, the Hamas leadership in **Damascus** dictates terrorist attack policy to the Hamas infrastructures in the PA. **That enables the Syrians to assume they will be able to influence any arrangement that ends the fighting between Israel and Hamas and the release of the abducted IDF soldier.** Damascus also assumes it will have in determining every aspect of the new reality created when the fighting in Lebanon ends.