

Israel and Syria Move Perilously Close to Starting an All-Out War

Insight on the News

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Although mainstream American media have focused on the recent violence in Jerusalem and Israeli strikes on West Bank towns such as Nablus, less attention has been paid to the volatile situation on the Israeli-Lebanese border, where escalating violence could force either nation to play the war card.

In recent months the Iranian-backed Shiite group Hezbollah (Party of God) has stepped up terrorist attacks from Syrian-occupied Lebanon. In April and early July, Israel retaliated with F-16s to penetrate and destroy Syrian outposts in Lebanon that were supporting Hezbollah attacks on the Israeli-controlled Sheeba Farms. Senior Israeli military officials warn that Hezbollah could transform this low-intensity conflict in Israel into a regional war between the Israelis and a Syrian-backed coalition.

All sides have been scrambling in recent weeks for a heavy-duty clash. The Jerusalem Post reported on July 9 that "elite Iranian Revolutionary Guards are in Lebanon, manning roughly 20 Hezbollah outposts armed with Fagr-5 rockets that can damage the port city of Haifa." On July 21, the Israeli Army prepared for a global call-up of Israelis around the world; the same week Syria's deputy president visited Iran to coordinate a joint defense in case of an all-out war with Israel. On Aug. 5, Lebanon's Daily Star newspaper reported that "the U.S. relayed a warning to Lebanon that Beirut will be targeted in response to any further attacks by Hezbollah fighters."

This perilous game of brinkmanship easily could get out of hand, observers say. Lily Poliack, an expert at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem on crisis behavior, said in early June, "If Hezbollah were to attack Israel in a manner viewed by Israelis as going beyond the bounds of a conventional attack -- such as a severe biological-chemical weapons assault -- Prime Minister Ariel Sharon would have little alternative but to launch a counterstrike, not only against Hezbollah, but also Syria proper."

Meron Medzini, a prominent Israeli political analyst and former press secretary for then-prime minister Golda Meir, tells the National Defense Council Foundation (NDCF) that he's concerned about weapons of mass destruction -- chemical, biological and nuclear -- filtering down from governments to state-sponsored proxy groups, such as Hezbollah, that are not fully under rein. This threat surfaced on Feb. 5, 2000, in a U.S. District Court in New York with the testimony of a member of Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda terrorist network, who stated that he attempted to buy enriched uranium for a future terrorist attack. Also worried is CIA Director George Tenet, who told the U.S. Senate in February that "we are seeing fewer centrally controlled operations and more acts initiated and executed at lower levels."

Israel, Syria and Iran all have revealed that their ballistic missiles are capable of mutual devastation if escalation reaches paramount levels. On July 3, Syria test-fired its Scud-B ballistic missile that has a range of 300 miles. Iran also has made no secret of its Shihab-3 missile, which can carry an unconventional warhead. All parties are aware of the roughly 200 nuclear warheads produced in Dimona and Israel's "Samson Complex."

Israeli officials tell the NDCF such hardware doesn't add up to a solid deterrent against autocratic regimes such as Syria, Iraq and Libya, whose leaders are infamous for irrational and unpredictable behavior. On

June 5, Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani declared in the Iranian press, "Israel is an illegitimate regime" reinforcing the position of the ruling mullahs who favor the destruction of Israel.

In the last 11 months the unrest in Israel has claimed the lives of nearly 700 Palestinians and Israelis. But the number of fatalities could increase astronomically if a slugfest breaks out on the Israeli-Syrian border and neither Syria nor Israel is able to restart a dialogue to abate the imbroglio there.

The Bush administration has an opportunity to show leadership by reiterating its support of U.N. Resolution 520 that calls for "the withdrawal of all non-Lebanese forces" from Lebanon and not just "redeployment" Israeli forces withdrew from southern Lebanon in May 2000, and now it is time for Syria to pull its forces out as well. Cessation of aid, lessening diplomatic ties to Damascus and adding Syria to the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act would make Syrian leader Bashar Assad think twice about Syria's occupation of Lebanon and endorsement of Hezbollah.

Without such pressure, conventional war looks more and more like conventional wisdom for the region.

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