

Israeli strikes in southern Lebanon threaten 'little war' with Syria

by Dean Andromidas

After two weeks of skirmishes in southern Lebanon near the Syrian border between the Israeli Defense Forces and fundamentalist Hezbollah guerrillas, Syria and Israel are heading toward a "little war." Daily air strikes and artillery shelling against Hezbollah-controlled villages have left over 20 Lebanese dead. On May 23, Syrian radio warned of the dangers of a "little war" or "limited conflict" with Israel. The Syrian warning drew a sharp response from Uri Lubrani, Israeli coordinator for operations in Lebanon, warning Syria that if it does not withdraw support from the Hezbollah guerrillas in southern Lebanon, an escalation will follow that "will be much more serious than what we have known up to the present."

While the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have sent substantial reinforcements into its self-styled "security zone" in southern Lebanon, including tanks and armored vehicles, thousands of Lebanese civilians have fled their villages to safety north of the Litani River. Israeli aircraft and artillery have been conducting almost daily strikes against Shiite villages in and to the north of the so-called "security zone." One air strike killed a family of four, the head of which the Israelis claimed was an Hezbollah commander, while villagers interviewed at the scene reported that he was a non-political businessman.

Simultaneous with strikes into southern Lebanon has been an escalation of violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories, which has left three Israelis dead, as well as several Palestinians. Following the killing of a 15-year-old Israeli girl in late May, the Israeli government closed off the Gaza Strip, preventing Palestinian laborers from going to their jobs in Israel. As tensions continued to mount, there was massive Israeli rioting in the Tel Aviv suburb of Bat Yam where demonstrators shouted "Death to the Arabs!" Then, the stabbing death of a rabbi from a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip, the third such killing in a week, led to further violence.

The response of Israeli authorities has typically been to punish not only the suspects but the entire Palestinian community: The curfew was extended and the authorities destroyed the home of the family of a 19-year-old Palestinian

suspect in the murder.

For weeks, the Israeli Defense Forces and security services have been conducting "terror against terror" operations among Palestinians, which has created an undercurrent of tension. Disguised as Palestinians, Israeli agents have entered refugee camps with the aim of eliminating Palestinians involved in the Intifada, and have operated on a "shoot first and ask questions later" basis. In recent days several Palestinians have been shot and killed in such operations.

Wrong way to get votes

These developments come only a few weeks before the June 23 Israeli elections, and speculation is rife that their aim is to bolster the position of the hard-line Likud party led by Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Housing Minister Ariel Sharon. Likud is said to be trailing behind the Labor Party led by Yitzhak Rabin, the former prime minister who had recently served as defense minister in a Likud-Labor coalition government.

On May 24, Israel's widest-circulation newspaper *Yediot Aharanot* warned that an Israeli military escalation into southern Lebanon "is playing with fire" and that "a disproportionate military reaction one month before the elections could lend credibility to accusations of electioneering." The newspaper reminded its readers that, in June 1981, the government of Menachem Begin, when faced with a collapse of his popularity in the opinion polls, sent the Air Force out to bomb Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor.

Yediot's view was backed by one senior Israeli source, who warned that "between now and the June 23 elections is the red danger zone period. Shamir could try to get a big thing out of such a war. If he is desperate, he may try to launch a war-like operation. Rabin is ahead in the polls, so Shamir might move to 'put things right.'"

A "little war" between Syria and Israel would be designed to "rally the nation" behind Shamir's Likud party, while the rise of Arab-Jewish violence within Israel and the Occupied Territories could instill enough insecurity among voters that would make them hesitant to vote out an incumbent government that has ruled for over a decade.

Why Syria is on the hot seat

If just the outcome of Israeli elections were involved, it is doubtful that the threat of a new Middle East war would be so great. However, Syria is about to become a new leading candidate for the “new world order” target list, complete with news commentators talking about the shape of a “post-Hafez al-Assad” Syria. The Hezbollah Shiite fundamentalists in Lebanon are primarily backed by Iran and enjoy the sponsorship of the highest political circles in Teheran. That aid is channeled through Damascus, which maintains 35,000 troops in Lebanon. President Assad’s support for Hezbollah is premised on an alliance with Iran which he deems necessary to strengthen his negotiating position at the Middle East peace talks and counterbalance a perceived threat from Turkey.

Writing in the *Jerusalem Post* on May 24, military commentator Alon Pinkas claimed that the Israeli action in Lebanon is to reassert the “status quo” there, which is a “de facto agreement” between Syria and Israel that “divided Lebanon in three: a Syrian enclave in the east, a 15-kilometer-deep security zone in the south, and a Lebanese state in Beirut, Tyre, Sidon and areas in between.” Pinkas charged that Syria’s continued support to Hezbollah violates that agreement. He warned that the current Israeli operations are designed to pressure Syria to cut its support of Hezbollah, and, if that fails, Israel has only one option: “a ground incursion on a large scale.”

Although Pinkas claimed such a move is unlikely, the United States has given Israel the green light to act in southern Lebanon. The U.S. State Department has been putting pressure on both Syria and the government of Lebanon. Following the IDF air strikes of May 21, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens revealed that the United States had warned Syria at the beginning of April to cut its support for the Hezbollah. When Lebanese Foreign Minister Faris Buwayz protested the late-May Israeli air strikes to the American ambassador in Beirut, he was curtly told that the United States could do nothing to restrain the Israelis as long as the Lebanese government does not disarm the Hezbollah militia.

Furthermore, the United States has blocked Lebanon from receiving any financial aid or international credits for its reconstruction in the wake of years of civil war. The economic consequences—which have meant tremendous suffering for Lebanon’s people—brought about enough political unrest that the government collapsed in early May.

Even the Russian Federation has joined in on pressuring Damascus to back off its support for Hezbollah. Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy held consultations with his Russian counterpart, Andrei Kozyrev, in Lisbon, Portugal during the May 22 conference on western aid to the Community of Independent States. Levy warned Kozyrev that Lebanon was becoming a “time bomb.” In response, Kozyrev acceded to his request to put pressure on Syria and said that

Russia will join the U.S. effort to use its influence with Syria to have it restrain the activities of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon.

Flashpoints for war: water . . .

Certainly pressure on Syria is aimed at bolstering the Israeli control of the Occupied Territories, but more is at stake than just land: The key is water and demographics.

A major conference on water was held in Vienna, Austria in May as part of the Middle East peace talks. All the principal negotiating partners in the talks are currently suffering major water shortages, and, moreover, most share the same watersheds or underground aquifers, particularly Israel, Jordan, and Syria; in fact, Israel’s Occupied Territories account for much of Israel’s water resources.

In 1990, Israeli Agriculture Minister, and leading hard-liner in the right-wing Tsomet Party, Gen. Raphael Eytan released a statement saying that 60% of Israel’s water comes from the West Bank and should never be given up to the complete control of the Palestinians: “The claim to continued Israeli control over Judaea and Samaria,” as the Israelis refer to the occupied West Bank, “is not based on extremist fanaticism or religious mysticism, but a rational survival instinct.”

While Palestinians on the West Bank are forbidden to drill deep wells, which reduces their consumption to 119 cubic meters per capita annually, Israeli settlers consume three times that amount.

In the 1967 Six Day War, Israel destroyed a dam in Syria on the Yarmuk River whose watershed overlaps Syria, Jordan, and the Israeli-occupied West Bank. It is feared that a series of new dams currently being build by the Syrians to ease Syria’s acute water shortage would be a likely target in a Syrian-Israeli “little war.”

. . . and demographics

The demographic issue is crucial in order to understand the Israelis’ determination to bring several million Russian Jews to Israel and to expand Jewish settlements in their Occupied Territories. Roughly 35% of the current population of Israel and the Occupied Territories is Palestinian or Arab, mostly confined to the Occupied Territories. Haifa University Prof. Aron Sofer, who is both Israel’s leading demographer and its leading water specialist, admitted that as long as it controls the Occupied Territories, “Israel can no longer be considered a Jewish state.” Whereas the birth rate of Israel’s Jewish population is 1%, the birth rate of Israel’s Palestinians is 5%—a rate that doubles the Palestinian population every 12 years.

Thus by the year 2005, the Palestinian population in Israel and the Occupied Territories will constitute an absolute majority. Clearly Israel’s hard-liners look at the immigration and settlements policy as their only hope for reversing this trend.