

Beating the Drums of a Broader Middle East War

Israel, Syria, and Lebanon Prepare the "Home Fronts"

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The Levant could be the starting point of a major international conflict with global ramifications and which could quickly spin out of control. Such a conflict could even involve the use of Israeli or American nuclear weapons against Iran and Syria. Syria has additionally declared that it is preparing for an inevitable war with Israel despite the fact that it believes that the chances of a war in 2008 are slim.

In the scenario of a war against Iran, the reaction of Syria will be pivotal. Damascus plays a central role and how it acts and reacts will have a definitive impact on Israeli military strategy in regards to Iran. It is in this context that Israel, the U.S. and the E.U., with the help of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, have been attempting to undermine and ultimately destroy the alliance between Syria and Iran. This is part of a geo-strategic stride to foreclose the possibility of a Mediterranean battle-front that might emerge in the Levant as a result of an attack on Iran.

The *casus belli* for an Israeli attack or a joint Israeli-U.S. attack, possibly involving NATO, against Syria or against both Syria and Iran could use the pretext of any form of retaliation by Hezbollah against Israel for the assassination in Damascus of one of its leaders, Imad Fayez Mughniyeh.

Hezbollah has joined Iranian officials in saying that the U.S. military is incapable of starting another war in the Middle East by launching attacks on Iran and Syria. [1] Israeli officials have also renewed calls for peace by openly mentioning that Tel Aviv is willing to return the Golan Heights back to the Syrians, while there have been strong political noises against the move in Israel. [2]

Tel Aviv is simultaneously part of a U.S. endeavour that claims Syria has a secret nuclear program aided by North Korea. [3] Strategic efforts, with strong links to war preparations, have also started with the aim of bringing temporary calm to the Palestinian Territories as part of the same track of events in the Levant.

Redrawing the Arab-Israeli Conflict as an Iranian-Israeli Conflict to justify War

Momentum is being built up against Iran in a list of growing, and more frequent, accusations against Tehran.

Iran is portrayed as the main threat against Israel. It is also accused of intervening in occupied Iraq and Afghanistan. In this sense, the Israeli-U.S. war plans in the Levant have been tied to Iran, as well as Syria. The investigative journalist Seymour M. Hersh, a Pulitzer

Prize winner, reported in 2006 that the Israeli war against Lebanon was part of this Israeli-U.S. military roadmap to ultimately target Iran.

The accusations against Tehran and Damascus are part of a calculated effort to justify attacks against Iran and Syria as the only means to achieve peace in the Levant between Israel and the Arabs. They are also upheld as justification to ensure the security and success of occupation forces, for Anglo-American and NATO forces respectively in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In this regard, the Gaza Strip, alongside Lebanon, is now being described by Tel Aviv as an “Iranian base” against Israel. Israel is pointing the finger more and more towards Tehran as the source of its problems.

This argument is fabricated. It is in blatant contradiction with the history of the Palestinian struggle. The inner causes and history of the Arab-Israeli Conflict are now being brushed aside and ignored. The Arab-Israeli Conflict is now being redefined as a mere existential conflict between Israel and a few irrational and violent Arab organizations controlled by Tehran.

All players, state or non-state, have rational interests and motives. All actions are also based on these interests and motives. Any analysis without the mention of these interests seeks to sidestep specific issues. By portraying the Arabs as inherently violent, the truth is being sidestepped without explaining the full rationale for their attacks against Israel.

This brushing aside of motives is part of a disinformation campaign, which is used to camouflage the truth. The historical facts of the Arab-Israeli Conflict are being redrawn with a view to presenting Tehran as having always been in the picture as a spoiler and a source of the Arab-Israeli Conflict. The motives for this agenda are to justify the outbreak of a conflict with Iran.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict is being redrawn as an Iranian-Israeli Conflict, where the Arabs are portrayed as Iran’s foot soldiers against Tel Aviv.



Turning the Tide of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Iranian Arms Shipments to the Levant

Although there have been reports of Iranian arm shipments to the Palestinians and Lebanon since the downfall of the Iranian monarchy, these reports had new value given to them after 2001.

The first such report to note came on January 3, 2002 when the *Karine-A* was intercepted en route in the Red Sea by Israeli naval commandos. Sceptics questioned how an undeclared arms shipment could pass through the heavily U.S. and NATO patrolled waters of the Red Sea. The Israeli capture made international headlines in 2002 as the Israelis revealed that the ship was carrying a major weapons cache headed for the Gaza Strip. A whole set of indicting links were made between the ship and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the Palestinian Authority (PA), and Iran. The Israelis maintained that the ships cargo came from an Iranian sea port in the Persian Gulf. The event was used not only to draw attention to Tehran as a problem in the Levant, but also by Tel Aviv as a part of the effort underway to portray Yasser Arafat as not being a genuine partner for peace.

Hezbollah and Syria have also been armed and supplied by Iran for years. Although neither the Lebanese nor Syria would attack Israel unless attacked, invaded, or occupied.

Aside from what it already possesses, Israel can no longer annex Arab territory any more than it has. Nor can Israel project itself as it once did. This is a major problem for establishing a new regional order. Iranian arms shipments and military aid have upset both strategic Anglo-American and Israeli interests in the Middle East. Arguably this has necessitated even more active involvement by America and Britain militarily in the Middle East.

After 2005 the Israeli claims about Iranian arms supplies to the Palestinians increased even more with the establishment of a Hamas-led government in the Palestinian Territories. After 2006, the reports concerning Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah started carrying a sense of urgency that they never had before. The upgrades being made to the Syrian military were also looked upon as provocative and inappropriate, even though the Israeli military had further upgraded and modernized its military arsenal.

In 2007 and 2008, the Israelis reported that Iran has increased its weapons shipments to the Palestinians. *The Jerusalem Post* made one such claim on April 17, 2008: "In recent months, the IDF has noticed an increase in Iranian-made weaponry in the Gaza Strip, including rockets and mortars. Terror groups [meaning the Palestinian Resistance] in Gaza recently were equipped by [Tehran] with two different types of mortar shells made in Iran — one 120 mm with a range of 10 kilometers like a Kassam rocket and another with a range of six kilometers." [4] The same report also continued to state that thousands of Iranian mortars were also imported by the Gaza Strip, which Israel has defined as a "Hostile Entity." [5]



The National Emergency Authority of Israel and its War Preparations

The National Emergency Authority (NEA) of Israel was created to administer and manage Israel, the "Home Front," under a "mass-casualty" scenario resulting from a major war. Israel's NEA was established in 2007 in the aftermath of the 2006 Israeli attack on Lebanon and the rocket counter-attacks on Israel from Lebanon. The creation of the National Emergency Authority is an integral part of Israeli war preparations.

The new organization planned five-day emergency exercises (April 6-11, 2008) that were linked to both Israeli military preparations and the preparation of Israeli civilians. These emergency exercises were the largest in the history of Israel. Strategically and as part of the bigger picture, the primary purpose of the emergency exercises were to prepare Israel for — using Condoleezza Rice's often mentioned words — "the birth pangs of a new Middle East" or a new regional order. This process, according to Tel Aviv, will be "painful for Israel." A regional war against Syria, Iran, and their allies has been presented to Israeli public opinion as a prerequisite to bringing about this new regional order and even for the very survival of Israel.

The Israeli exercises simulated mass evacuations from "hit zones" and large patient build-ups in crowded Israeli hospitals. [6] In the event of the conflict exercised for the Knesset, government offices, power stations, bridges, military facilities, and state buildings are also expected to be attacked, damaged, and destroyed. This is why respective entities in Israel such as the Knesset and Israeli government offices all participated in the drills.

Drills involving preparations for chemical and biological weapons were also executed. Israel has also maintained that Syria with the help of Iran has been upgrading its chemical weaponry. Reports of an incident involving Syrian and Iranian military specialists and engineers were also used as justification by Israel in regards to preparations against Syrian chemical and biological weapons during the exercises. [7]

Segments of the emergency exercises took place beforehand. Starting on March 18, 2008 the Barzilai Hospital held full-scale emergency exercises that simulated direct rocket and missile hits on the hospital in the city of Ashkelon. [8] The city of Ashkelon, adjacent to the

Gaza Strip, is an important Israeli maritime and commercial port and is the entrance point for energy supplies from Egyptian natural gas fields in the Mediterranean Sea.

Tel Aviv keeps the Public in the Dark: Omitting Iran from a War Scenario

In 2007, a media propaganda campaign was launched to influence international public opinion in the event of an Israeli war against Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. Israeli sources have claimed Iran is also preparing its journalists for an Israeli war against Lebanon and Syria. [9] 2008 has seen an even higher stage of Israeli war preparations.

In 2007, Aharon Ze'evi-Farkash, the former commander of Israeli military intelligence, communicated his fear that a war with Iran, launched by Israel's American ally, could start before the "Home Front" in Israel was prepared.

In this context the aims of the Israeli emergency exercises were to condition Israelis for such a war. Under the war scenario played out by Israeli officials, the whole of Israel was part of a simulated battle-front in which missiles and rockets would be launched from the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, and Syria. Under the scenario, some 400 to 500 projectiles were expected to hit Israel on a daily basis.

A key and very notable aspect of the emergency drills was that Iranian involvement was excluded from the scenario. In the event of a war with Iran, Tehran has credibly maintained that it can launch over 11, 000 missiles and rockets in a minute. [10]

In this regard, a two-sided approach was taken by Israeli officials in regards to their emergency preparations. War preparations and scenario layouts had two dimensions, one for the Israeli public and an accurate one kept for the scrutiny of Israeli officials that was withheld from the Israeli public.

The rationale for the two-set approach by officials in Tel Aviv was to hide the real scope and magnitude of a regional war on Israel and to reduce fear, panic, and any anti-war sentiment amongst Israelis that would develop if they realized the immense harms they would face if their government launched a regional war involving Syria and Iran.

Additionally, days after the nationwide Israeli emergency exercises were completed the Israeli military tested an imitation of an Iranian ballistic missile in isolation, away from the public. [11] If not central, Iran is clearly a real and major part of Tel Aviv's war preparations.

The Emergency War Scenario: An Israeli Omission of War Plans?

The first day of the emergency exercises were characterised by the formation of an Israeli war cabinet scenario in response to a major "enemy attack." [12] This war cabinet would respond to the "enemy." Although, it should be noted that all Israeli responses have been calculated and predetermined and include the use of a nuclear strike option against Iran and Syria. [13] Such an act would have apocalyptic ramifications in the Middle East and worldwide.

The war scenario envisioned and simulated by Israeli planners during the national emergency exercise in Israel foresaw massive damage and casualties through missile and rocket attacks by "Arab enemies." The scenario excluded the significantly larger Iranian arsenal. This accounts for the lower number of missile and rocket hits; 400 to 500 per day.

The Israeli scenario, however, also projects a smaller amount of strikes by the rockets and missiles of the “Arab enemies” on the initial day of the war. In other words, strikes in realistic numbers against Israel were missing on the initial day of the war scenario and this makes very little sense in regard to a hypothetical Arab offensive against Israel.

Hezbollah alone has over 13, 000 rockets according to Israel itself. In addition, Hezbollah’s arsenal is nothing compared to the capabilities and size of the Syrian one. Under the Israeli scenario the hypothetical war only lasted for about a week; the math does not tally up unless the scenario is not what Israeli officials maintain.

The Israeli simulation is an omission in regards to who plans on starting the war and who will attack in retaliation. Under these circumstance, Helmi Musa a columnist for *As-Safir*, a major Lebanese newspaper, pointed out that “this Israeli exercise has signalled, for the first time, to ‘whom starts and to whom retaliates.’ If the Arabs are to start this battle, it would see an intensive rocket strike on the first day with thousands of rockets launched [and not the few hundred that Israeli strategists predict].” Unknown to the Israeli public the scenario being simulated was one where the “Arab enemies” were reacting to an Israeli attack and probably fighting Israeli incursions too. This would account for the low number of strikes. If they, the Arab players outlined by the drills, were to have attacked Israel first it is fair to assume that the number of strikes on Israel would have been their largest on the initial day of the scenario.

Syrian National Emergency Exercises: A counter-measure to Israeli War Drills

Syria has repeatedly maintained since 2007 that it has made a strategic decision to pursue peace with Israel, but is also prepared to protect itself if attacked. [14] At the start of April 2008, the Syrian Deputy-Foreign Minister, Faisal Al-Mekdad, in an interview with *Al-Thawra*, a government-owned newspaper in Syria, acknowledged that Damascus was ready for a clash with Tel Aviv. He told *Al-Thawra* that Israeli war preparations were forcing Syrian strategists to draw their own contingency plans for a conflict in advance. “If Syria is the target of all of this [meaning the Israeli emergency drills], know that we are following the drill and are also developing our capabilities and our plans to face the Israeli [manoeuvres],” the Syrian Deputy-Foreign Minister told *Al-Thawra*. [15]

True enough, in response to Israeli war preparations, the Syrians also announced two days after the start of the Israeli exercises that Damascus planned to hold national emergency exercises too. *Al-Thawra* reported that the nationwide exercises in Syria were announced during a cabinet meeting of Syrian ministers. The military, the police, security forces, and civil institutes were all said to have roles in what was termed as a part of “general preparations for natural disasters and crises” by the Syrian government.

In reality the emergency preparations were part of Syria’s preparation to repel any Israeli attack that could occur directly or as a result of an Israeli war with Lebanon that would by extension include Syria.

What is crucial in understanding the evolving Middle Eastern war theater is that the movements taking place in both Syria and Israel are unprecedented. Along with the growing Israeli-U.S. threats directed against Iran, including statements of support for military action from the E.U. and NATO, there is justifiable reason for apprehension and concern.

2008: The Year of an Israeli Invasion of Syria?

The Syrian border with Israel has been peaceful for decades and is one of Israel's most peaceful frontiers. Yet, tensions have been rising. In 2006 Israel created a new series of military units specifically for a war with Syria, amongst them was the Kfir infantry brigade, the largest military unit in Israel. In addition, the Israeli military predicted in 2007 that a war would breakout between Syria and Israel in 2008 if no settlement were reached between Tel Aviv and Damascus. [16]

Since the 2006 Israeli failure in Lebanon, the Israeli military has been routinely performing simulations of an Israeli invasion of Syria. A great deal of Israeli manpower has been dedicated to an invasion force that would attack Syria. Major-General Eyal Ben-Reuven, a reservist general, declared in 2007 that Israel is "preparing itself for an all-out war." [17] Major-General Eyal Ben-Reuven also stated that Israel must invade Syria to Israeli troops. He first stated that "the IDF's mission will be very focused and will have to be quick, in order to neutralize as quickly as possible the strategic areas threatening Israel's soft underbelly, thus preventing Syria [from] reaching its coveted goals." Eyal Ben-Reuven also gave some depiction about the shape of a war against Syria. Ben-Reuven stated "that in order to carry out such missions successfully, an extensive ground operation will be needed," meaning a land invasion of Syria, which would most probably swiftly target Damascus and the Syrian southern governorates.

This strategic aim also explains the well reported Israeli invasion exercises of model Syrian villages and Israeli military exercises in the Golan Heights. [18] Israel and the U.S. have also held strategy meetings to formulate a course of military actions to be taken in Lebanon and against both Syria and Iran. According to a report from Qatar by *Al-Watan* a senior Syrian officials indicated that the Israeli emergency exercises were surveyed by an American general and also involved military operations on the borders of Syria. [19]

Syrian mobilization on the Lebanese border in preparation for Israeli Attacks

Ehud Barak, in the capacity of an Israeli defence minister, on April 2, 2008 renewed Israeli threats of war against Hezbollah, Lebanon, and Syria. According to Israeli sources the Syrians believe that Israel will launch another military invasion of Lebanon on the pretext of addressing Hezbollah in a pre-emptive war. In this context since 2006 Tel Aviv has been calling Hezbollah "the growing threat in Lebanon" or "the growing threat in the 'Northern Front.'" In light of this, Israeli and other Middle Eastern sources have reported that Syria started reinforcing its military presence on the Lebanese-Syrian border before the start of April, 2008 and had placed all its forces on high alert.

The Syrians were also reported to believe that the Beirut-Damascus Highway would be targeted with greater ferociousness by Tel Aviv than in the summer of 2006 to prevent logistical support from reaching Hezbollah and Lebanon. Israeli sources also maintain that the Syrians also started mobilizing their reserve forces on the Lebanese-Syrian boarder. In addition, the Syrians were reported to have deployed three armoured divisions, nine divisions of mechanized infantry, and special forces units opposite the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon. [20] In line with this Israeli sources additionally insisted that Palestinian fighters were also amassing in the Bekaa Valley in coordination with Syria and Hezbollah.

Hours after the original report about the mobilization of the Syrian military was released by *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, a London-based Arabic newspaper, the top brass of Israel came out to respond. Major-General Dan Harel indirectly gave a message to Damascus. The Deputy Chief of Staff for the Israeli military told reporters gathered for a press briefing that "anyone

who tries to harm Israel must remember that it is the strongest country in the region, and retaliation will be powerful and painful.” [21] Syria was being told to look out.

In the days following this statement emanating from the Israeli military, Syrian officials gave mixed responses about Syrian war preparations. Damascus denied reports that Syrian troops were amassing on the Lebanese-Syrian border. Syrian officials responded that despite the fact that the Israelis were making war preparations against Syria, Damascus was not increasing the troop presence on the Lebanese-Syrian border.

During an interview with Al-Arabiya, Mohammed Habash, an important Syrian parliamentarian, refuted the reports about the mobilization of Syrian reserves on the border with Lebanon in preparation for an Israeli attack. The Syrian parliamentarian, who is the chairman of the Syrian Parliament’s strategically important Syrian-Iranian Committee, also pointed the finger at Tel Aviv for escalating tensions in the Levant: “Syria is ready to defend itself but is not striving for war — it is the Israeli side that is taking steps to bring about an escalation.” [22]

In the same timeframe as the reports of Syrian mobilization on the unfortified Lebanese-Syrian border, there was also an increase of Israeli military air traffic near the Syrian and Lebanese borders. The Israeli military also acknowledged that additional Israeli warplanes were displaced to Israel’s northern borders and in a state of high alert.

Internationalizing “Hezbollah” as a Menace: Pretext for NATO intrusions in Lebanon?

On April 8, 2008 Bernard Kouchner, France’s top diplomat and head of the French Foreign Ministry, revealed that Mohammed Zuhair Siddiq the individual who was a star witness in the Hariri Assassination and a source for claims of Syrian involvement in the event had disappeared while he was under French protection. Even more significant, Bernard Kouchner also proclaimed that “Hezbollah” was no longer “a domestic issue for Lebanon.” The implications of this statement carry significant indications.

Monsieur Kouchner additionally announced that the weapons that Hezbollah carried were also a serious international concern. The ground was being paved for NATO’s active involvement in Lebanon. Hezbollah was being targeted through the internationalization of concerns over its arms. What was being implied in Paris was that international action should be taken against Hezbollah.

The statements of U.S. and Coalition representatives in Iraq, such as General Petraeus, about the involvement of Hezbollah in attacks against U.S. and Coalition troops and claims that Hezbollah is training Iraqi militias inside Iran also serve this purpose. [23]

Just a few days after the statements by Bernard Kouchner the head of the disputed Lebanese government, Fouad Siniora, asserted in close proximity to Israeli and Syrian war preparations and the renewed American pressure on Iran that the time for internal dialogue was over in Lebanon. Foud Siniora made the announcement while the Parliamentary Speaker of Lebanon, Nabih Berri, was in Damascus meeting with Syrian officials as part of a diplomatic tour of Arab capitals to get Arab League support for new intra-Lebanese political dialogue.

The Third Expanded Ministerial Conference of the Neighbouring Countries of Iraq, which was

held in Kuwait, was also related to Lebanon. The international conference hosted by the Kuwaitis on April 22, 2008 involved much more international players than just the neighbours of Iraq and its scope included the whole Middle East.

The U.S., Saudi Arabia, France, Britain, and several other Arab states all pushed ahead with an agenda to internationalize the political deadlock in Lebanon and to present Hezbollah as an international concern too. In league with these efforts to internationalize Hezbollah as a global problem the U.N. Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, also released a report claiming that Hezbollah was an international problem. All these events were part of the brinkmanship for internationalizing Hezbollah as a threat and eventually justifying U.S. and NATO intervention in Lebanon.

The efforts to internationalize Hezbollah as a menace also entered a new phase in Lebanon too. The Hariri-led *March 14 Alliance*, which effectively forms the Lebanese government, declared that it would take legal action in May, 2008 against Hezbollah because of a camera network monitoring Lebanon's main airport and a vital parallel security telecommunications network setup by the group. These internal efforts against Hezbollah were executed through the coordination of the *March 14 Alliance* with U.S. and Saudi Arabian diplomats in Beirut.

Lebanon prepares for Israeli Attacks

The Syrian border with Israel is heavily fortified, unlike the Lebanese-Syrian border. This is why the Israeli military was desperately pushing to get to the banks of the Litani River before the Syrians could fully prepare in 2006. A quick Israeli land assault against Damascus, which is seated close to the Lebanese-Syrian border, would have to go through Lebanon and not through the Golan Heights or the Israeli frontier with Syria. Any invasion of Syria through the Israeli-Syrian border would be secondary in nature. For this reason amongst several others, Lebanon is tied to Israeli war plans against Syria. To invade Lebanon a pretext is needed and Hezbollah is that pretext.

After the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, the U.S. Navy deployed a contingent of warships to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Lebanese coast on February 28, 2008. The White House claimed that the rationale for the deployment was to establish stability in Lebanon and to help democracy in Lebanon.

In a case of bitter irony the naval deployment had a reverse effect. It contributed to elevating tensions in Beirut and the entire country. The U.S. move was made without the permission of Lebanon and the Lebanese government was forced to denounce it. The majority of Lebanese citizens also felt threatened and were outraged about the U.S. deployment in their waters. Because of public opinion in Lebanon the Lebanese government and the *March 14 Alliance* denied any ties or advanced knowledge about the U.S. naval deployment off the coast of Lebanon.

In connection to the U.S. naval build-up, news broke out of an alleged U.S. conspiracy against the Free Patriotic Movement, Lebanon's largest Christian political party and a member of the Lebanese National Opposition.

Michel Aoun, the former commander of the Lebanese military and the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, and other Christian Lebanese leaders opposed to the interests of the U.S., Israel, and France in Lebanon have been systematically targeted. On August 2, 2007 the White House even passed an executive order to freeze the financial assets of any

individual or group deemed to oppose Fouad Siniora and the *March 14 Alliance*. The mass protests by Lebanese citizens against the *March 14 Alliance*, which were peaceful acts of political and democratic expression, were even called “undemocratic” and “destabilizing” acts by President George Bush Jr. and the White House.

What this signifies, aside from U.S. meddling in the domestic affairs and politics of Lebanon, is that the political opposition to the Lebanese government was being targeted in the name of democracy and governance.

Since 2006, the Free Patriotic Movement and several other Christian political parties have been staunch political allies of Hezbollah. They are consequently at odds with the U.S. and France and have refused to bend to foreign pressure. They firmly oppose Israel and have protested U.S. and French meddling in Lebanon’s internal affairs. Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement, and these Christian political parties are also allied to several other political parties that represent Lebanon’s Druze, ethnic Armenian (which are Christian), and Sunni Muslim communities.

Several key political figures in the *March 14 Alliance*, such as Walid Jumblatt and Samir Geagea, have been working hand in glove with the White House and Tel Aviv against the political alliance between the Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah. These individuals have had regular meetings with U.S., Saudi, French, and Israeli officials. This includes meetings with Ehud Barak where attacks and tactics against Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement, Syria, and Iran were discussed.

Along with the Hariri family, these Lebanese figures are being used to open an internal front against Hezbollah and its political allies in Lebanon. After the 2006 defeat of Israel, these Lebanese figures and their parties also slowly started being armed by the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and others. Pentagon weapons shipments that were intended for use in Anglo-American occupied Iraq were also covertly making their way into the hands of these Lebanese factions. The U.S. has also been cooperating with them in preparations being made on the Lebanese-Syrian border and in efforts to make parallel chains of command in the Lebanese military that could be used against Hezbollah and the Lebanese National Opposition.

Moving forward, days before the Israeli emergency exercise, the Siniora government ordered the Lebanese military to be on full alert for “Israeli violations.” In Lebanon the *March 14 Alliance* and the Lebanese National Opposition in concurrence comprehended the possibility of conflict. Both the Lebanese government and Hezbollah made it clear that they were watching Israeli forces and that both were prepared for the serious possibility of another conflict between Lebanon and Israel. [24] In addition, the U.S. State Department official responsible for American relations with Lebanon, C. David Welch, also promised a “hot summer” in Lebanon if the Lebanese National Opposition did not capitulate.

According to Israeli sources citing *Fars News Agency* (FNA) and the Syrian newspaper *Al-Hakikah*, Hezbollah warned Israel that if it launched another war against Lebanon that Hezbollah would carry the war into Israel. In Israel this information was claimed to mean by xenophobic and ultra-Zionist elements that Israeli Arabs (Palestinians with Israeli citizenships who did not leave their homeland) would act as fifth columnists for Iran and Lebanon. An unnamed senior Hezbollah official was quoted as saying, “In the next war, we will run the battle for the first time since 1948 inside Palestine. They will be more surprised than ever before, as they will see our fighters fighting them not only in Lebanon, as they did till now, but also inside their homes and settlements.” [25] The same Hezbollah official is

quoted as also saying “The next war, if it breaks out, will be an offensive war on our part. This doesn’t mean we will initiate the war, but that every war they launch in the future will become what the organized armies in the world refer to as a counteroffensive on our part. They will see our fighters behind their lines, not just in front of them.” [26]

The Independent, one of Britain’s most respected newspapers, has reported that Hezbollah has also been sending trainees to Iran: “Yet it is an open secret south of the Litani [River] that thousands of young men have been leaving their villages for military training in Iran. Up to 300 men are taken to Beirut en route to Tehran each month and the operation has been running since November of 2006; in all, as many as 4,500 [Hezbollah] members have been sent for three-month sessions of live-fire ammunition and rocket exercises to create a nucleus of Iranian-trained guerrillas for the ‘next’ [Israeli attack against Lebanon].” [27]

Another British source, *The Observer*, has also reported about war preparations in Lebanon: “But an *Observer* investigation [by Mitchell Prothero] has discovered that [Hezbollah] is quietly but steadily replacing its dead and redoubling its recruitment efforts in anticipation of a new, and even more brutal, conflict. [Hezbollah] has embarked on a major expansion of its fighting capability and is now sending hundreds, if not thousands, of young men into intensive training camps in Lebanon, Syria and Iran to ready itself for war with Israel. ‘It’s not a matter of if,’ says one [member of Hezbollah]. ‘It’s a matter of when Sayed [Hassan] Nasrallah [{Hezbollah’s political} chief] commands us.’” [28]

In light of the preparations in Lebanon for an Israeli attack, the number of Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace also increased starting in March, 2008. The Israelis openly violated Lebanese airspace and conducted military flights over Beirut and elsewhere in Lebanon in April and May, 2008. In April, 2008 the Lebanese military even acknowledged that Israeli warplanes had been performing military reconnaissance missions over Lebanon and that these missions were linked to Israeli war preparations. [29]

The Independent has also gone on to pronounce, with the context of aerial war in mind, that in the next war against Lebanon that Israeli supremacy in the air would be challenged by the Lebanese because of Iranian military technology and hardware: “For months, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, the [Hezbollah] leader, has been warning Israel that his organisation has a ‘surprise’ new weapon in its armoury and there are few in Lebanon who do not suspect that this is a new Iranian-developed ground-to-air missile — rockets which may at last challenge Israel’s air supremacy over Lebanon.” [30]

The Brzezinski and Carter visits to Damascus

Tel Aviv and Washington, D.C. have not given up their efforts to prevent the emergence of a Mediterranean battle-front in a war against Iran. With the rise of regional tensions in the Middle East it was announced that former U.S. President James E. Carter Jr. had flown to Egypt and the Levant for a fact-finding mission with a view to promoting peace. To some, the announcement sounded like a breath of fresh air. The former U.S. president, met with leaders and officials in Egypt, Israel, the West Bank, and Syria.

It should be noted that Jimmy Carter met with President Basher Al-Assad in Syria just months after Zbigniew Brzezinski headed a RAND Corporation delegation to Damascus on February 12, 2008. [31] The sequence of these meetings is not coincidental. Brzezinski was a U.S. national security advisor under the Carter Administration. Both men could also have been involved in talks with Iranian diplomats and officials in Damascus.

What really highlighted Carter's trip to the Middle East were his meetings in Damascus with the leader-in-exile of Hamas, Khaled Meshaal, on April 18 and 19, 2008. [32] The controversy behind the meetings with Hamas was that they had been portrayed as diplomatic taboo in an effort to isolate the Palestinian organization in the Middle East and global arena.

Before the meetings in Damascus, Carter had prior meetings with representatives of Hamas in Cairo. [33] From the start of the talks between the political leadership of Hamas and Jimmy Carter, the media reported that Israel and the U.S. were fiercely opposed to these meetings. [34] In reality, the Bush Jr. Administration and Israel were supportive of these meetings.

Engaging Hamas: An Attempt to Deactivate the Opening of a Palestinian Front?

Despite the claims of Condoleezza Rice, the Carter Center even released a statement from its headquarters in Atlanta saying that the U.S. State Department made no objections about Carter's meetings with Hamas officials and the Syrians. In the past, the White House secretly supported Nancy Pelosi's 2007 visit to Damascus with a bipartisan U.S. delegation. It was in the same timeframe as Nancy Pelosi's visit to Syria that a Bush Jr. Administration official arrived in Damascus to talk about "Iraqi refugees" and that Condoleezza Rice went on to hold talks with the Syrian Foreign Minister in Egypt. In this case Jimmy Carter was part of concerted efforts by the U.S. and Israeli governments to disengage the fighting between the Palestinians and Israel in the Gaza Strip through a truce.

While public opinion was led to believe that Israel was opposed to the Hamas-Carter talks, the former U.S. president was in fact negotiating directly with Hamas on behalf of Israeli officials.

While the Israeli government reaffirmed that Hamas could not be a "partner for peace", Jimmy Carter was passing on messages from the Israeli government to both Hamas and Syria. According to Carter's own words, he was acting in the Middle East as a communicator and intermediary between the parties.

A closer examination of what transpired between Hamas and Carter reveals the true nature and purpose of the Carter mission.

The deputy prime minister of Israel is Eli Yishai, who is also responsible for the Israeli Ministry of Industry. Eli Yishai's office acknowledged on April 18, 2008 that the second highest ranking official in the Israeli government had asked Jimmy Carter to arrange meetings between Hamas and Eli Yishai. The pretext and justification was to discuss a possible prisoner exchange for Gilad Shalit, an Israeli corporal captured by Hamas and two other Palestinian groups. [35] Officially, it was claimed that Eli Yishai, the leader of the Shas Party, had defied government policy with his request.

In actuality, Israel has been negotiating a ceasefire with Hamas. Ehud Olmert's comments to *Yedioth Ahronoth*, an Israeli newspaper, spell out the real reasons why Carter was reported not to have met with Israeli leaders prior to his visit to Syria: "Were Jimmy Carter to have met with me, and two days later with Khaled Meshaal, it could have created a facade of negotiations between us and Hamas." [36] Ehud Olmert's public rebuff of Jimmy Carter was also announced as not being personal by Yohanan Plesner, a member of Ehud Olmert's Kadima Party, during meetings with Carter in Jerusalem. [37] Undoubtedly, the meeting

between Carter and Plesner would not have happened without Olmert's okay. Ehud Olmert's messages were being passed to Carter through his Kadima subordinate.

Adding context to the mission by Carter is crucial. His visit came at a junction in time when war was being openly talked about not just against Lebanon and Syria, but against Iran.

On April 20, 2008, the Syrian President announced that messages had been exchanged between Israel and Syria through an unnamed third party, to explore the possibility of resuming Israeli-Syrian peace talks. [38] This was merely days after Carter's visit to Damascus.

Two days later, on April 23, 2008, it was reported worldwide that the Israeli government had notified Damascus on April 22, 2008 through Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the third party, that Israel was ready to return the Golan Heights to Syria. [39] The Turkish government had served as a go between since 2006, exchanging messages between Israel and Syria. The Israelis also insisted, again, that Syria knew what the conditions for peace were: *the dissociation of Damascus from Iran and the Resistance Bloc*. [40]

The American role in these overtures to Hamas and Syria is also a major factor. Syria was even reported to have requested U.S. involvement in peace talks with Israeli officials. In fact, a few days after the end of the Carter mission and the Israeli messages sent via Turkey, the Syrian Foreign Minister travelled to Tehran to discuss the Israeli and U.S. proposals with Iranian officials. It is clear that Syria will not end its alliance with Iran. While in Tehran, the Syrian Foreign Minister stated that Israel should withdraw to the international boundary of 1967 and not just withdraw from the Golan Heights alone. [41]

The Palestinian-Syrian-Iranian United Front

Ten different Palestinian organizations opposing Israel are hosted by Syria, and thus called the "Palestinian Damascus Ten," whereas many other capitals in the Arab World have rejected hosting them. While some of these Palestinian organizations are Syrian surrogates, they are considered as "rejectionists," because they adamantly oppose the one-sided Palestinian-Israeli agreements dictated by the White House and accepted by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Amongst the rejectionists are Hamas, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), and the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF or PSF).

Hamas along with the Damascus-based Palestinian groups are aligned to both Tehran and Damascus. It is on this basis that ties linking the Palestinians, Syria, and Iran have developed.

The Palestinian Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, while visiting Tehran in 2006 referred to Iran as the "strategic depth" of the Palestinian people in their struggle against Israel. [42] Syrian, Libyan, Lebanese, Algerian, and Iraqi officials, amongst many others in the Arab World, have also called Iran the "strategic depth" of the Arabs against Israel. In relationship to these ties, Khaleed Meshaal announced in 2005 during high-level meetings in Tehran that Hamas and the Palestinians would support their important ally Iran in a regional war. [43] This factor is of immense importance in the case of an Israeli-U.S. war directed against Syria and Iran.

Alongside Hamas, most of these Palestinian organizations and their supporters, including those in Egypt and Jordan, have also made it clear, through announcements in 2005, 2006, and 2007 that they would lead the Palestinians in battle as part of a united front in the case of an all encompassing conflict in the Middle East. This is another dimension of the Mediterranean battle-front that would emerge in a war against Iran.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan could be sucked into any regional war involving the Palestinians as allies of Syria and Iran. There are more Palestinians and Iraqis in Jordan than there are Jordanian Arabs. Jordan could also face simultaneous civil war and regime change in Amman, where a new republican government could take over and ally itself with Syria and Iran. This would have major ramifications against the U.S. and Israel. Other Arab regimes are also vulnerable too.

In this regard, the leaders in Cairo have been pushing for a truce between Israel and the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. Omar Sueiman, an Egyptian cabinet minister working in the capacity of the chief of Egyptian intelligence, was also sent to Tel Aviv several times by his government, to assist Israel in neutralizing a potential Palestinian front from emerging in the context of a regional war scenario.

Furthermore, if a regional war were to break out, Palestinian fighters would confront Israeli forces, with the help of Syria and Iran. At this particular juncture, the dialogue with Hamas is part of an effort to silence or disengage the “Palestinian Front” by establishing a truce between Hamas and Israel, prior to the commencement of a war with Iran.

The March to War in the Levant and its relationship to a Broader War involving Iran

Despite the Israeli-Syrian peace talks, the two sides are involved in war preparations.

Zalman Shoval, a former Israeli diplomat and politician describes this evolving situation as follows: “The message I received in Washington about two weeks ago [in the start of April, 2008] was clear and included a trace of displeasure: Why do you have people [in Israel], and ministers in particular, who continue to amuse themselves with the baseless notion that conditions for peace between Israel and Syria have been created?” [44]

In the eyes of both those controlling the U.S. and Israeli governments, the terms of a so-called peace must be dictated by the victors, those with the upper hand. According to the Fox News Network the Bush Jr. Administration also signed a secretive, unprecedented, and broad directive in March, 2008 to target Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and those in Lebanon that are opposed to America’s agenda for establishing a new regional order.

The Levant is on a serious war footing.

All major players in the Levant have been continuously talking about war.

Tel Aviv’s leaders have insisted that they are not seeking war with Syria. Tel Aviv has maintained that it wants peace with Syria, even on the eve of the largest emergency exercise in the history of Israel, which included open war preparations by the Israeli military on the Syrian border. These exercises included simulations of an Israeli invasion of Syria.

The Israeli government insisted that Israel was not making war preparations against Syria despite the fact that the scenarios played out in Israel for over a year,

identified Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories as the enemies. [45]

Moreover, Israeli officials have continuously threatened to retaliate with a heavy hand against any attempts against Israel.

Al-Watan has also revealed that defensive preparations are being made by Syria against Israeli attacks expected to be launched in the summer months of 2008 in close coordination with U.S. military planners, just as they were against Lebanon in 2006. [46] May and June, 2008, are expected to be possible windows of time for an Israeli offensive against Syria.

On the other hand, *Al-Watan* reported (April 3, 2008) that the Israeli government would in 2009 distribute gas masks to its citizens, in anticipation of attacks using chemical and biological weapons. This report could be an indication that there will be no war in 2008.

Several reports from the Middle East maintain that all the players involved in the Levant are preparing for a scenario where Israel is awaiting retaliation by Hezbollah for the Mughniyeh Assassination. This scenario of expected retaliation could be used by Israel to draw Syria into the conflict. The situation would then escalate as Iran intervenes militarily against Israel to protect its allies. In turn, the United States and NATO would intervene to protect Israel.

Other analysts suggest, on the other hand, that Israeli-U.S. strikes against Lebanon, Syria, and Iran would be implemented almost simultaneously. Still others believe that Iran will be attacked first and then a front in the Levant will be opened.

Other plausible reports suggest that secret negotiations have been ongoing between all parties and that war will be avoided either because of a weakened U.S. military, which has forced America to negotiate with Iran or because of emerging common interests between Iran and America.

Another outlook is that Tel Aviv has no intention of striking Iran, which has advanced military capabilities of retaliation against Israel. But Israel still intends to attack Lebanon.

Whatever the scenario, the United States and Israel are making joint preparations and intend to confront the same players including Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas.

General Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, the top U.S. civilian official in Iraq, have told the U.S. Senate that Syria and Iran are using a "Lebanization strategy" in Iraq. A "Lebanization strategy" according to Ambassador Crocker is a political strategy where local forces are committed to alignments with Syria and Iran. This is being painted as the reason behind Anglo-American failure in Iraq. As mentioned earlier Hezbollah and Iran, along with Syria, are also being blamed for U.S. and Coalition deaths in Iraq.

Since 2003, Israel and the U.S. have been looking for ways to force Syria into surrendering or for waging an isolated war against Damascus without involving Tehran.

The window of time for an isolated war against Syria, apart from one with Iran, appears to have vanished and a war against Syria seems to be planned alongside the conflict with Iran. Moreover, Russia has also initiated a naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and off the Syrian coast to protect Syria and to challenge the U.S. and its NATO allies. [47] Both Russia and Iran have also been arming Syria and cooperating together.

The march to war in the Levant is linked to the stride towards conflict with Iran.

Syria has long been a target of Israel and America. At this point it is fitting to refer back to an incisive British report from 2006 by *The Sunday Times*: “‘The challenge from Iran and Syria is now top of the Israeli defence agenda, higher than the Palestinian one,’ said an Israeli defence source. Shortly before the war in Lebanon Major-General Eliezer Shkedi, the commander of the air force, was placed in charge of the ‘Iranian front’, a new position in the Israeli Defence Forces. His job will be to command any future strikes on Iran and Syria.” [48]

This account from *The Sunday Times* indicates that the war against Lebanon in 2006 was part of a broader war agenda in the Middle East. Moreover, an Israeli command post against Iran was established prior to the 2006 war. The article also illustrates the intricate link between a war against Iran and war plans against Lebanon and Syria. Further details are also given in regards to Israeli preparations for Syria in 2006: “‘In the past we prepared for a possible military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities,’ said one insider, ‘but Iran’s growing confidence after the war in Lebanon means we have to prepare for a full-scale war, in which Syria will be an important player.’ A new infantry brigade has been formed named Kfir (lion cub), which will be the largest in the Israeli army [and responsible for an invasion of Syria]. ‘It is a partial solution for the challenge of the Syrian commando brigades, which are considered better [trained and equipped] than Hezbollah’s [militia],’ a military source said.” [49]

Eric S. Margolis, one of Canada’s most respected columnists has also linked war preparations against Lebanon and Syria as part of a broader war scenario directed against Iran: “Israel, backed by the [White House], certainly has been using the carrot of a return of [the] Golan to entice Syria away from Iran. But there is also a big stick: Ever-stronger threats of a U.S.-Israeli attack on Syria. Israel’s September [2007] attack on Syria was a clear warning. Cheney and fellow militarists are pushing hard for attacks on Syria, Lebanon and Iran before President George W. Bush leaves office. Neocons have flocked to [Senator] John McCain’s banner — in spite of Hillary Clinton’s vow to ‘obliterate’ Iran if it attacked Israel with nuclear weapons. They believe U.S. attacks on Arab states and/or Iran would prove decisive in winning the presidency for McCain this November. A U.S. attack on Syria could well be the first step of a broader air war against Lebanon and Iran.” [50]

In a regional war scenario, Israel will deal mainly with Lebanon and Syria while the U.S. and Britain will deal mainly with Iran. [51] The help of Turkey and NATO will definitely be needed by Israel, America, and Britain in such a war. Ankara and NATO will also be involved in both fronts. [52]

NATO has already built a presence on the western borders of Syria and Lebanon and inside Afghanistan on the eastern borders of Iran with forward positions. Israeli officials such as Shaul Mofaz have also stated, in no uncertain terms, that if they launch an attack on Iran, the U.S. and NATO will come to the aid of Tel Aviv.

Only time will tell what happens. In the words of Robert Fisk, “Whether this frightening conflict takes place will depend on President Bush’s behaviour. If America — or its proxy, Israel — bombs Iran, the response is likely to be swift...” [53]

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Also see:

[The March to War: Israel Prepares for War against Lebanon and Syria](#)

[The March to War: Syria Preparing for US-Israeli Attacks](#)

[NATO and Israel: Instruments of America's Wars in the Middle East](#)

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