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BASHAR'S FIRST TEST

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On the night of April 16, the Israeli Air Force attacked a Syrian radar position in the area of Dahr al-Baidar, near the Beirut-Damascus highway. As a result of the air strike, three Syrian soldiers were killed and three others were wounded. The Israeli operation, which was aimed at a Syrian military target in Lebanon, was the first of its type in many years. It came in response to a Hizbullah attack, two days before, on an Israeli outpost on Mount Dov (in an area called "Sheba' Farms" by the Lebanese), during which one Israeli soldier was killed.

Israel quickly announced that the air strike signaled the beginning of a new policy in Lebanon. Israeli spokesmen declared that, henceforth, Israel would no longer sit quietly while Hizbullah attacked its forces in the area of Sheba' Farms. Instead, it would react by attacking Syrian targets in Lebanon. The spokesmen added that although Israel had withdrawn to the international border in May 2000, Hizbullah continued to attack Israeli targets. In the course of these attacks, three Israeli soldiers were killed and three others were kidnapped. Since Israeli restraint failed to elicit parallel restraint on the part of Hizbullah, the Israeli government concluded that it had no choice but to respond forcefully in order to

restore deterrence that had been badly eroded in this sector. But Israel chose not to strike at Hizbullah or at Lebanese infrastructure, as in the past. Instead, it attacked a Syrian installation in order to deprive Hizbullah of any pretext to retaliate with Katyusha rockets against civilian targets in Israel. Such retaliation would almost certainly have come had Israel hit civilian targets in Lebanon.

The Israeli attack presents President Bashar al-Asad with his first major test since coming to power in June 2000 following the death of his father. Over the course of the past year, observers have frequently noted that Bashar is young and inexperienced and, unlike his father, has never suffered a defeat at the hands of Israel. Furthermore, his speeches at the Cairo and Amman Arab Summit Conferences were infused with inflammatory rhetoric. He called on the Arabs to adopt a more forceful approach and claimed that they are fully able to cope with Israel, even if not in a direct confrontation.

But in the moment of truth, following the Israeli attack on a Syrian military position, Bashar has apparently chosen to follow in his father's footsteps and avoid any immediate reaction. He, too, appreciates the balance of forces between

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the two sides and acknowledges Israel's clear military superiority. Even in his summit conference speeches, Bashar warned the Arabs not to allow Israel to drag them into a full-scale war and urged them, instead, to impose forms of struggle more advantageous to them. In this context, he cited the examples of Hizbullah guerrilla warfare and the low-intensity conflict waged by the Palestinians. Bashar's ability to exercise restraint is presumably facilitated by the fact that the Syrian media do not play the same role as they do in Israel of fomenting anxiety and whipping up public pressure for a forceful response and a demonstration of leadership. Moreover, Syria sees the Arab-Israeli confrontation as a protracted historical conflict in which the victor will be the one who displays greater staying power and doesn't succumb to the impulse to react to every provocation. In this sense, Syrian self-restraint is not seen as humiliation or surrender.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Bashar will order Hizbullah to cease its operations following the latest Israeli operation. That would be seen as surrender to Israel. Sooner or later, Hizbullah will therefore act again, and Israel will then launch more strikes against Syrian targets in Lebanon. Where will all this lead? It appears that Israel, the Syrians, and even Hizbullah are not really interested in escalation to the point of a full-scale regional confrontation. At the same time, things can spiral out of control, with Hizbullah attacks provoking ever more intense Israeli responses. Bashar's ability to refrain from responding to Israeli attacks on his own forces is not unlimited. Hence, the potential for a large-scale explosion. The recent Israeli action may therefore be a temporary palliative but it does not solve the problem of Hizbullah.

Finally, the Israeli attack comes at a difficult moment for Bashar, both domestically and abroad. At home, he faces increasingly strident calls for far-reaching political reforms. The

regime has recently responded by cracking down on those voicing these demands, but it has not been able to silence them completely. In Lebanon, Syria is exposed to growing demands by various sectors of the Lebanese public to withdraw Syrian forces. True, these demands are still confined to limited circles, some in the Maronite leadership headed by the Maronite Patriarch, Archbishop Nasrallah Sfeir, and some in the Druze leadership. But even Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri has suggested that Syrian-Lebanese relations need to be reassessed, and one of his newspapers went a step further and attacked the action by Hizbullah, which it described as badly timed. This outburst reflects not only tension in the Beirut-Damascus axis, but also growing criticism of Hizbullah activity, which is seen as jeopardizing stability in Lebanon and subordinating Lebanese interests to those of foreign powers (Syria and Iran).

In the short term, the Israeli attack may stifle these voices, since they do not want to appear as collaborators with Israel. But over time, it may actually stimulate the departure of Syrian forces, since it serves as a dramatic reminder of their continuing presence in Lebanon and of the fact that Syria is the source of many of Lebanon's current problems. By the same token, it could pose a serious challenge to Hizbullah. Still, these are underlying processes that will work themselves out only in the medium- and long-term. For the time being, they do not threaten Syria's status in Lebanon.

The Israeli air strike opens a new chapter in the complex and dynamic triangle of Israeli-Syrian-Lebanese relations. In his first test, Bashar has thus far been relatively successful -- he avoided being dragged into a confrontation with Israel but was not forced to rein in Hizbullah. What remains to be seen is how he will perform in the tests yet to come.