

Syria's Return to Lebanon: The Challenge of the Lebanese State and the Role of Hizbollah

Daniel Sobelman

On July 7, 2006, the Beirut newspaper *al-Mustaqbal*, owned by Saad al-Din al-Hariri, published an article that in retrospect seems almost prophetic. Less than three weeks prior, Gilad Shalit was kidnapped on the border of the Gaza Strip, and Israel, writer Nasir al-Asaad warned, was in a state of frenzy and sending threatening messages to Damascus and Hizbollah, warning them against provocations. "What was passed over on previous occasions will not be passed over now," al-Asaad cautioned, and added, "It would not be overstating the case to say that Lebanon is directly exposed to danger." In previous years, the United States had restrained Israel, but this time, there would be no such restraint. He explained: "Needless to say, opening a front in Southern Lebanon, regardless of the reason, will expose Lebanon to the Israeli frenzy, and will also be of no use to the Palestinians themselves." Al-Asaad summed up by saying that it was in Lebanon's interest

to refrain from supplying military and warlike "contributions" that this time could make Lebanon pay a very heavy price...The coming days, and perhaps the next few hours, present Lebanon and the Lebanese with a great challenge. The challenge here is how to make defense of [Lebanon's] national interest against the dangerous consequences the top priority, above any other priority.¹

Five days later, Hizbollah kidnapped two IDF soldiers on the northern border, an action that set off the Second Lebanon War.

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In recent months, commentators in the same newspaper, whose owner has since become prime minister of Lebanon, have warned against Lebanon being dragged into a regional confrontation between Israel, Syria, and Iran. In a long series of anxious articles that apparently reflect the prime minister's opinion, the newspaper's commentators are now warning that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards are acting to divert attention from events in Iran by mobilizing its allies in the Middle East.² Al-Asaad and other journalists are again speaking out and urging Hizbollah to refrain from supplying Israel with "excuses," lest the events of July 2006 repeat themselves.³ The fear of war in Lebanon has been palpable for several months. Already in early January, a journalist closely associated with Hizbollah wrote that "the possibility of an Israeli war against Lebanon in the next three months" was discussed at virtually every gathering in Lebanon.⁴

The Lebanese discourse resonates in the context of assessments that the international conflict concerning Iran's nuclear program is liable to lead to a confrontation and undermine stability in the entire region. No less important, however, this discourse, like virtually any other discussion in Lebanon, occurs in the context of what is emerging as Syria's return to the Lebanese theater and the subjugation of Lebanon, including Hizbollah, to the Syrian agenda.

The Restoration of Syrian Influence in Lebanon

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domination over its western neighbor. Damascus had in the past based its control of Lebanon on a massive military presence and its pervasive involvement in management of the theater. In recent years, it has been extending its control gradually through a combination of political alliances, assassination of opponents, and regional diplomacy.

The restoration of Syria's influence in Lebanon, although less ubiquitous than before, is a result of its successful extrication from the isolation that followed the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005.

The change of administration in Washington and the softening of the American policy towards the Syrian regime were also interpreted as a weakening of the international support for the opposition in Lebanon, the March 14 Alliance. In addition, significant political changes have taken place in Lebanon itself, and the opposition began to recognize the strategic influence of Damascus on Lebanon's stability.

The withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon in the spring of 2005 and the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006 created a deep political rift in Lebanon. A series of influential actors, including Saudi Arabia, France, the US, and Iran, hurried to fill the vacuum left by Syria by increasing their influence in the country. Internally, the fault line left the country torn between two main rival camps divided on the question of Lebanon's commitment to Syria and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The rift aggravated the conflict not only with respect to Lebanon's identity, but also concerning a highly sensitive and volatile question: the continued existence of Hizbollah's military apparatus, independent from the state's institutions.

By successfully balancing one another, the two camps caused such severe internal paralysis and tension that public discourse in Lebanon began to focus on what all the players regarded as a concrete risk of a renewed civil war. The tension peaked on May 7, 2008, when in response to the government's attempt to dismantle part of Hizbollah's operational telephone network, the organization took over West Beirut and wreaked havoc on its political opponents' main media outlets, effectively shutting them down. This act, Hizbollah's biggest domestic display of force since the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1989, delivered an unmistakable message that any attempt to undermine the organization would necessarily upset the country's stability.⁵

In December 2009, about five months after the parliamentary elections, a national unity government was established headed by Saad al-Din al-Hariri (the son of the assassinated ex-prime minister). The rapprochement between Syria and Saudi Arabia, which facilitated the October 2009 Syrian-Saudi Arabian summit, paved the way for the establishment of the unity government in Lebanon. This, along with the interest of all parties in calming the situation in Lebanon, probably augurs well for a period of relative political quiet and renewed stability, at

least in the near future. Yet even if the political and ethnic fault lines have been blurred, they still lurk unmistakably beneath the surface.

An “Independent,” but not anti-Syrian, Lebanon

In recent months, both sides in Lebanon have expressed satisfaction at the course taken by Lebanon. The leaders of the March 14 camp claim that the struggle they waged over the past five years has achieved independence for Lebanon. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, until recently the most outspoken opponent of Syria and Hizbollah, summed it up by saying,

We will one day proudly write the history of the March 14 camp, which led to independence. At the same time, however, we have a strong neighbor named Syria, with which we have historic relations. We can't ignore it; we have to respect it...We have achieved a great deal in the framework of March 14, but we should not demand the impossible.⁶

The recognition of Syria's key role led al-Hariri to make a two-day visit to Damascus in late December, during which he held meetings described as “historic” with Syrian president Bashar al-Asad. This summit was no trivial matter; in the wake of his father's assassination, al-Hariri held the Syrian president responsible for the murder. Before his visit, al-Hariri declared that Syria and Lebanon should launch relations “as between equals.” Later, he declared that a new leaf with Syria had been turned over on the basis of mutual respect and joint interests.⁷

A qualitative change has occurred in Damascus-Beirut relations from what prevailed until a few years ago, when the slogan of “a unity of fate and paths” was heard on an almost daily basis, and the head of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon managed Lebanese affairs in detail. Nevertheless, to say that Lebanon has become an independent country is an overstatement. While Syria and Lebanon exchanged ambassadors last year and they are expected to begin demarcating an official border between them for the first time, with regard to the Middle East conflict in general and Syrian interests in particular, although Lebanon has come a long way in reinforcing its sovereignty, it is far from independent. Information leaked to the Lebanese press on Syria's behalf indicates that Damascus has demanded absolute allegiance to the Syrian agenda from its new loyalists.⁸

According to the information leaked in Lebanon following the talks between Asad and al-Hariri, the Syrian president presented his former enemy with two fundamental principles on which he was unwilling to compromise: Hizbollah, and what was defined as the strategic relations between the two countries. In this context, Asad reaffirmed to his counterpart the basic principle that has guided Syria for many years: by no means will it accept a situation where its security and stability are exposed to any danger originating in Lebanon. As a direct consequence of this, Asad stated that Beirut must coordinate its foreign policy with Damascus. According to reports in Lebanon, even when the arrangements for the Lebanese prime minister's visit were made, Asad made "hostility to Israel" and "maintaining the resistance in Lebanon and coordination with Syria" the basic conditions for making a fresh start.

As of the spring of 2010, it appeared that al-Hariri had fully acquiesced to Bashar al-Asad's terms, meaning that the renewed political struggle that began five years ago over Lebanon's political orientation in the Middle East was coming full circle. The political consensus in Lebanon states that Israel, not Syria, is the enemy and the principal threat to Lebanon, and Lebanon remains part of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This state of affairs matches Hizbollah's view, which holds that "Lebanon's location on the borders of occupied Palestine and in a region subject to the effects of the conflict with the Israeli enemy obligates the country to bear national and pan-Arab responsibility." The Shiite organization believes that Lebanon's geopolitical position "commits it to the just Arab issues, headed by the Palestinian cause and the conflict with the Israeli enemy."⁹

In recent months Hizbollah has won public internal ideological and political support from some of its important opponents. On the eve of the formation of the unity government, al-Hariri commented on the dispute over the continued existence of Hizbollah as an armed organization, saying, "There was a period in which we disagreed about the resistance, but we have turned over a new leaf, and this ammunition will in no way be directed internally against Lebanon." He added, "If Israel decides tomorrow to commit aggression against Lebanon, will we say then that our resistance is illegal, or will we

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endorse the resistance, with all of us acting together as Lebanese – the state, the army, the people, and the resistance?”¹⁰ On another occasion, al-Hariri cautioned Israel that it should not assume that in the event of a renewed conflict, Lebanon would once again become divided.¹¹

Similarly, Jumblatt described Hizbollah’s weapons as “the main guarantee for dealing with any possible Israeli aggression against Lebanon.”¹² As part of his renewed rapprochement with Syria, facilitated by the Hizbollah secretary general, who acted as main intermediary, it was reported that Jumblatt had expressed to Nasrallah his deep commitment to the “resistance” option and the strategic path to which Lebanon was committed in the event of a confrontation with Israel.¹³

The Defense Strategy Challenge

In the near future, regional developments, mainly those involving Iran, will likely affect events in the internal Lebanese theater, perhaps to an unprecedented degree. For months, Lebanon has been living in the shadow of its anxiety about a regional conflict involving Iran – a conflict that is liable to spread to Lebanon. Furthermore, the consolidation of Syrian hegemony in Lebanon is augmenting the risk that Hizbollah and all of Lebanon with it will become involved in a regional conflict in one way or another, especially if it includes Syria.

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In early February Syrian foreign minister Walid al-Muallem, in uncharacteristic fashion, said that any Israeli attack on Syria “would mean an all-out war...It would be all-out, whether it takes place in Southern Lebanon or Syria.” He added that war would cause damage to Israel’s cities.¹⁴ The heightened tension between Israel and Syria, which stemmed from Israel’s threat to attack a target in Syrian territory,¹⁵ was apparently prompted by the supply of Scud and other advanced missiles to Hizbollah. As a direct consequence of this tension, a tripartite summit was convened in Damascus, attended by the leaders of Syria, Iran, and Hizbollah. This was an unprecedented event, whose purpose was to demonstrate a united front in the face of regional

challenges, including concern about an Israeli military strike against Iran, but mostly against Syria and Hizbollah. The tripartite summit also led to the formal upgrading of the status of Hizbollah's secretary general to that of a regional player and leader.¹⁶ In a certain sense, Syria has taken care that the political vacuum in Lebanon created by its withdrawal in 2005 would be filled mainly by Hizbollah.

On the day following the summit, a senior Hizbollah official was quoted as saying that in the "work meeting" between Bashar al-Asad, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Nasrallah, "it was stressed that any attack on Lebanon would amount to an attack on Syria, and any attack on Syria would be considered an attack on Lebanon."¹⁷ Although later the organization denied that a joint defense pact had been signed, the intention nonetheless was that in the event of a confrontation between Israel and Syria, Hizbollah would be liable to initiate military action against Israel. For his part, Asad refused to divulge whether Syria would come to Hizbollah's aid if Israel attacked Lebanon. "We won't show our cards," he said.¹⁸ The Syrian president's remarks reflected his sense that Syria's strategic environment has become more comfortable.

On the other hand, for months, al-Hariri, Lebanese president Michel Suleiman, and the Lebanese army have all exerted their influence to prevent Lebanon from being dragged into a military conflict, mainly by urging not to give Israel "excuses" to attack Lebanon. As part of these efforts, and against the Syrian-Iranian policy, the Lebanese president recently attempted to define clearly the status and military function of Hizbollah, while publicly announcing that defending Lebanon was the army's job. This measure reflects a profound disagreement that will probably not be resolved in the near future. In certain circumstances, it is also likely to force Hizbollah to choose between its priorities of "the resistance axis" and the Lebanese state.

In previous years, the Lebanese military was considered no more than a gendarmerie. Now, however, an effort on the part of senior Lebanese officials and the military itself to establish and bolster its status, a measure supported economically by the US,¹⁹ is now evident. A Lebanese military source was prominently quoted in *al-Safir* as predicting that war with Israel was not expected, and that the army was operating to maintain security in Southern Lebanon and along the border with Israel: "We, and especially the resistance, will not provide Israel with an

excuse for aggression. This does not mean that we are not being careful, or that we as an army, a people, and the resistance are not in a state of readiness.”²⁰ Lebanese military chief General Jean Qahwagi declared, “Lebanon’s power – the main guarantee in dealing with regional upsets – rests primarily on the strength of the army, the backbone of the state, which has the confidence of all Lebanese.”²¹

In what was perceived as a countermeasure by Suleiman, the Lebanese president announced on the day following the tripartite summit that the national dialogue meetings would resume. He made this announcement without any consultation with Damascus, which was surprised, and not pleased, by the measure.²² On eve of the renewal of the dialogue on March 9, he revealed that in previous discussions, it was agreed that “the resistance would kick in once occupation takes place, in the event that the army proves unable to carry out its duties, in the event that it collapses under enemy pressure, or if it asks the resistance for assistance.”²³ Like President Suleiman, Prime Minister al-Hariri also supports a defensive strategy, in which the army plays a key role.²⁴

In other words, the support that Hizbollah receives from the state’s leaders is not a blank check. Furthermore, the public support that the Shiite organization receives does not mean that it will henceforth have a public mandate to expose the country to a renewed risk of war with Israel, as occurred on July 12, 2006. In early May, following the reports that Scud missiles were supplied to Hizbollah, al-Hariri was quick to deny the remarks that were previously attributed, in which he was cited as supporting the organization’s right to arm itself with such weapons.²⁵

Nevertheless, it is difficult at this stage to visualize the process started by Suleiman developing into a defensive strategy that would make Hizbollah subordinate to the Lebanese government. While Hizbollah and Syria have no interest in the collapse of the Lebanese system, from their perspective an excessively independent and strong Lebanese regime would be liable to pose a challenge to their interests and to Hizbollah’s room to maneuver. There is no doubt that Hizbollah is now entering the national dialogue with a reinforced status. Following the convening of the national dialogue forum – in its first sessions the representatives refrained from so much as maintaining eye contact with each other²⁶ – Syria’s allies in Lebanon launched a campaign against President Suleiman. The situation was summed up in a headline in the pro-Syrian

daily *al-Akhbar*: “His Excellency the President: His Mouth is in Syria, His Heart is in Washington and Riyadh.”²⁷

The political and ethnic rift, which widened greatly following the Second Lebanon War, was quite detrimental to Hizbollah, which needs public support and comfortable surroundings in order to enable it to achieve its strategic goal: preservation of the “resistance.” In Hizbollah’s viewpoint, blurring the public rift is an important achievement. Ibrahim al-Amin, who is extremely close to the organization, wrote, “At the end of four years, Hizbollah again faces the test of a total war by Israel, and perhaps also by the other devils in the world. It knows in advance, however, that an alliance of Lebanese – a group that includes far more than half of the population – stands at its side.”²⁸ Nawaf al-Musawi, a Hizbollah member of parliament, said that the “resistance” had invested efforts in the general public sphere in order to benefit from a friendly and “united home front.”²⁹

Even if the internal rift in Lebanon remains unhealed, there is no doubt that the Lebanese environment is currently more comfortable for Hizbollah than in recent years. Five years after Hizbollah was obliged to deal with the consequences of the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, and four years after the blow it suffered in the Second Lebanon War, Naim Qasim, the organization’s deputy secretary general, declared recently that the center of power in Lebanon, the Middle East, and the international theater had shifted, and that “the situation cannot be compared to the one that prevailed in 2005.” The United States, Nasrallah’s deputy explained, was busy with Iraq and Afghanistan, and at the current stage, Hizbollah felt more satisfied with its situation than ever before.³⁰ Muhammad Raad, a senior Hizbollah official, stated that Security Council Resolution 1559, which obligated Lebanon to disarm the “militias” on its territory, i.e., the military wing of Hizbollah, “had become a dead letter.”³¹

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While in previous years Hizbollah cited tactical issues (e.g., the Lebanese prisoners and Shab’a farms) in order to justify its continued existence as a military organization, it now appears that it no longer feels any need to do so. More than ever before, Hizbollah’s status is that of a

regional player. Nasrallah himself recently declared that his organization had become part of “not only the Lebanese defense equation, but also the regional and global equation.”³² From this standpoint, it appears that Hizbollah has succeeded in achieving a critical mass within Lebanon and in rendering its military power a *fait accompli*, with the power of shaping the image of Lebanon to a large extent, at least for the coming years.

Hizbollah’s recognition of its basic need for the broadest public support possible is likely to have a restraining effect on its actions. If Hizbollah does decide to intervene in a military conflict in the region – without having being challenged directly by Israel – it may attempt to draw Israel into attacking first, thereby justifying its entry into the campaign.

Conclusion

At the moment it appears that Hizbollah is preparing militarily and politically for a renewed confrontation – mostly in a regional context – even though another war with Israel is not a scenario that the organization desires. As of now, the restraining effect of Israeli deterrence has been effective since August 2006, even if a conflict between the two sides continues in more clandestine channels. Since the ceasefire took effect, Nasrallah has been careful to declare in almost every speech that his organization does not wish for war. Equally important, Hizbollah currently believes that a war with Israel is not expected in the coming months, and perhaps not in the coming years.³³

Since the Second Lebanon War, Hizbollah has worked gradually and prudently to restore its deterrence against Israel, mainly – it says – to prevent another war. On several occasions after making statements about the organization’s military power and issuing threats against Israel, Nasrallah explained that his threats were designed to deter Israel and to prevent war.³⁴ His deputy stated in March that the defense of Lebanon and the establishment of a balance of deterrence against Israel were now the leading priority.³⁵ Nasrallah’s recent remarks indicate that he believes that his organization has succeeded in this task. From his perspective, his organization’s success in arming itself with relatively advanced missiles and developing capabilities that it did not previously possess, without Israel acting to foil such action, has presented Israel with a *fait accompli*. One question is whether Hizbollah will exploit what

it regards as success in achieving a balance of deterrence in order to test Israel again by demonstrating greater daring against it in the military sphere, or whether the mutual balance of deterrence will restrain and curb the two sides, thereby ensuring continued stability. The assessment by the parties that a Third Lebanon War would be more far reaching and destructive than the previous rounds of violence could also dictate restraint to Israel and Hizbollah.

However, as Syria strengthens its hegemony in Lebanon, the commitment by Hizbollah – which has openly become part of Syria's system of deterrence – to actively support Syria and perhaps also Iran in any future conflict is also likely to increase. Thus other Lebanese leaders, and possibly the army, are liable to find themselves facing their moment of truth. Hizbollah is aware of this. Nasrallah has stated more than once that if another war with Israel breaks out, the face of the region would change. It currently appears that the organization is also establishing its deterrence within Lebanon: sources around the organization recently voiced implied threats that any attempt to exploit a regional conflict to attack Hizbollah (such as it claimed took place in 2006) would lead to a change in the political system that has been in force in Lebanon since 1943,³⁶ and to what was described as “a political May 7”³⁷ – a hint at a military takeover of Beirut by the organization.

The extent of Hizbollah's involvement in any future regional conflict remains unclear. On the one hand, issues and forces larger than Hizbollah itself – namely its patrons Syria and Iran – are expected to affect its future and behavior. Nasrallah's deputy recently hinted at this when he warned, “Israel and the US cannot bomb Iran and expect things to continue as usual...any attack on Iran can ignite the entire region, and the attacker, whether it is Israel or the US, will pay a heavy price.”³⁸

On the other hand, Hizbollah itself cannot know at this stage what role it will play in a regional conflict, and to what extent it will place itself at the disposal of Syria and Iran if they are attacked. Qasim admitted that there were several possible scenarios, and that all he could say was, “We will determine our position according to the character of the Israeli aggression, according to what we regard as appropriate...I do not know to what extent the various parties will intervene in order to halt the aggression, and what coordination will take place between them.”³⁹ Despite Hizbollah's relations with Iran and Syria, it cannot be concluded

that the organization would automatically involve itself in any conflict, especially if it believes that the result would be an unrestrained response by Israel against Lebanon. If it believes that it can remain untouched or escape with a minimum of damage, the probability that it will act will be greater.

In any event, Syria's success in restoring its status and domination in Lebanon are likely to bring Hizbollah's moment of truth nearer, in which it will face a real dilemma. It may be forced to choose between its loyalty to the axis of resistance and its loyalty to Lebanon, and it may confront the need to reduce the risk of being drawn into a regional conflict, as well as perhaps an internal one.

Notes

- 1 *Al-Mustaqbal*, July 7, 2006.
- 2 For example, *al-Mustaqbal*, January 30, 2010.
- 3 *Al-Mustaqbal*, January 18, 2010.
- 4 *Al-Akhbar*, January 9, 2010.
- 5 On these events, see Eyal Zisser, *Lebanon: Blood in the Cedars: From the Civil War to the Second Lebanon War* (Bnei Brak: Kibbutz HaMeuhad, 2009), pp. 346-48.
- 6 *AFP*, January 17, 2010. In a March 13 interview with al-Jazeera, Jumblatt completed the process by apologizing on the air for his condemnation of the Syrian president, and even forgave Syria for the 1977 murder of his father, Kamal Jumblatt. Two weeks later, the Syrian president greeted him in Damascus.
- 7 *Al-Safir*, February 9, 2010.
- 8 For example, see *al-Akhbar*, March 13, 2010, and *al-Safir*, March 18, 2010.
- 9 See "The 2009 Political Document of Hizbollah," published on November 30, 2010. For the full document in Arabic, see <http://www.moqawama.org/essaydetailsf.php?eid=16245&fid=47>.
- 10 *Al-Safir*, November 27, 2009.
- 11 *Al-Safir*, January 28, 2010.
- 12 *Al-Safir*, January 23, 2010.
- 13 *Al-Akhbar*, March 18, 2010.
- 14 *A-sharq al-Awsat*, February 4, 2010.
- 15 *Al-Akhbar*, March 20, 2010. On 28 May, the *London Times* reported that Hizbollah had access to secret arms depots inside Syria, which the Lebanese party was operating freely. The following day, Israel's Channel 2 Television cited Prime Minister Netanyahu as confirming the report.
- 16 A story published in *al-Akhbar* on March 18, 2010 described Nasrallah as "Syria's secretary general in Lebanon," and stated, "Nasrallah is Syria's key in Lebanon, and Lebanon's key in Syria."

- 17 *Al-Akhbar*, March 1, 2010.
- 18 *Al-Safir*, May 18, 2010.
- 19 A senior official in the US embassy in Lebanon noted that since 2006, the US had provided over \$500 million in aid to the Lebanese army. See *A-sharq al-Awsat*, May 7, 2010.
- 20 *Al-Safir*, January 16, 2010.
- 21 *Al-Hayat*, February 21, 2010.
- 22 *Al-Akhbar*, March 11, 2010.
- 23 *A-sharq al-Awsat*, March 8, 2010.
- 24 *Al-Hayat*, December 29, 2009.
- 25 *Al-Mustaqbal*, May 12, 2010.
- 26 *Al-Hayat*, March 10, 2010.
- 27 *Al-Akhbar*, March 12, 2010.
- 28 *Al-Akhbar*, February 8, 2010.
- 29 *Al-Hayat*, January 17, 2010.
- 30 *A-sharq al-Awsat*, April 17, 2010.
- 31 *Al-Liwaa*, December 25, 2009.
- 32 *Al-Hayat*, May 22, 2010.
- 33 *Al-Hayat*, December 28, 2009.
- 34 For example, on February 16, 2010, Nasrallah threatened that if Israel attacks the southern suburbs of Beirut, Hizbollah would bomb Tel Aviv, and if Israel attacks Lebanon's international airport, his organization would hit Ben Gurion Airport. In a speech on March 2, he explained that sometimes "you must say certain things in order to prevent war." Nasrallah spoke along the same lines on August 14, 2007, when he said that his declaration that Hizbollah now possessed a "big surprise" was designed to deter Israel, not to promote war. In a speech on May 1, Nasrallah claimed that Israeli rhetoric had changed following his February 16 speech, which proved his assertion that he had succeeded in creating a balance of deterrence against Israel.
- 35 *Al Intiqad*, March 19, 2010.
- 36 *Al-Akhbar*, March 20, 2010.
- 37 *Al-Akhbar*, March 30, 2010.
- 38 *Reuters*, March 18, 2010.
- 39 *A-sharq al-Awsat*, April 17, 2010.