

# The Mouse and the Lion:

## Syria – Between Passive and Active Resistance to Israel

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### Introduction: A Mouse on the Golan and a Lion in Lebanon

The entry of Syrian forces into Lebanon in the middle of the 1970s aroused fierce opposition towards Syria among many Lebanese. They objected to the destruction in their country caused by the Syrian forces, and in particular worried that Damascus intended to do away with Lebanon's existence as an independent entity and annex it to Syria. The more outspoken among them even dared to speak out against Syrian president Hafez al-Asad, using the strident phrase: "*fa'r fi al-Julan waAsad fi Lubnan*" – "a mouse on the Golan and a lion in Lebanon" – suggesting that Asad uses his power to trample Lebanon brutally (as befitting his name, Asad meaning "lion"), but at the same time displays hesitancy and even cowardice towards Israel on the Golan Heights, and balks at action to restore the Golan to Syrian control, as if he were a frightened mouse (*fa'r*).<sup>1</sup>

This *modus operandi* – or possibly non-action – by Syria towards Israel continued in the following years and still prevails today. Indeed, notwithstanding the hostile and threatening statements that Syria frequently makes towards Israel, the Syrians surprisingly – but consistently – maintain complete calm along the Golan Heights, their border with Israel, and desist from any moves, including responses to Israeli action against them, that may upset the calm on the border.

This pattern of inaction is rooted in a solid worldview that has governed the Syrian regime since its inception. It is also reflected semantically in phrases used habitually by Syrian spokespeople in

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recent years and in recent Syrian discourse. These include the terms *mumana'a*, which means passive resistance and is used to describe Syrian's behavior towards Israel, and *muqawama*, a term that means active resistance and is used to describe the operational approach adopted by Hamas and Hizbollah. The latter conduct an active struggle against Israel, made possible by the policy of passive resistance adopted by Damascus. In an address at the Arab summit in Damascus on March 26, 2008, Syrian foreign minister Walid al-Mu'alim called Damascus "the capital of Arabism and passive resistance" (*'asimat al-'uruba wal- mumana'a*),<sup>2</sup> and at the time of the summit Radio Damascus said that Syria is working to establish an axis, or even a front, of passive resistance (*mihwar al-mumana'a*),<sup>3</sup> and elsewhere the terms *jabhat* or *fustat al-muqawama* were used) dominated by Syria and incorporating Iran and Hizbollah.<sup>4</sup>

Syrian spokespeople use these terms to explain (or even give legitimacy to) Syria's recurring conduct towards Israel based on restraint and desistance from any move or action against its southerly neighbor liable to lead to a major escalation in which Syria has absolutely no interest. As some Syrians explain, Damascus may be a radical base, a pillar of "the axis of evil," as former president George Bush put it, but that encapsulates its overall role and considers its strategic reality, and one should not expect this radicalism (passive resistance) to galvanize it to take actual action against Israel, or even to respond or instigate a reprisal to Israel's actions.

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### September 6, 2007: Syria's Familiar Desistance from Response

In the wake of the 2006 Second Lebanon War, tension between Israel and Syria escalated to the point of concern that a confrontation between the two countries might erupt. Although the war took place between Israel and Hizbollah, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad was quick to take credit for what was considered by many in the Arab

world as the organization's victory in the war. In a series of addresses made by Bashar towards the end of the war he even implied to Jerusalem threateningly that he would consider adopting Hizbollah's

approach if Israel continued to occupy the Golan Heights and refused to conduct talks over returning the land to Syria. These threats lent further credence to the claim made by Damascus that following the war in Lebanon, the rules of the game between Jerusalem and Damascus had changed, and that Israel no longer enjoys a strategic advantage over Syria or complete operational freedom in the Syrian arena.<sup>5</sup>

However, the tension between Israel and Syria dissipated quickly, and with it the view among many in Israel that war was imminent. On September 6, 2007, Israeli jets attacked and destroyed a nuclear facility under construction in the region of Dayr al-Zur in northern Syria. Syria quickly released an announcement about the attack, although it said the target was an empty military structure under construction and definitely not a nuclear plant. For its part, Israel never officially responded to the Syrian announcement, although in April 2008 the White House confirmed that the attack had taken place and that the target was a nuclear facility that Syria sought to build in the north of the country with the aid of North Korea.<sup>6</sup>

Following the attack attention centered on Damascus in the tense expectation that Bashar al-Asad would respond to the Israeli move that, at the end of the day, had far reaching strategic significance for all aspects of Israeli-Syrian relations, and in particular with regard to the balance of power between them. It dashed Syria's hopes of attaining nuclear weapons while inflicting a blatant blow to Syria's sovereignty and humiliating the regime and particularly the Syrian military, which was helpless and idle following the Israeli attack. However, Bashar surprisingly refused to respond or launch any reprisals against Israel following the attack on the nuclear plant.

Likewise after September 2007 Syria's president was once again forced to confront the dilemma whether to act against Israel, in response to a number of moves that were aimed against Syria that he attributed to Israel. On February 12, 2008 Hizbollah military commander 'Imad Mughniyyah was assassinated in the heart of Damascus, and on the night of August 1, 2008, Muhammad Sulayman, one of Bashar al-Asad's closest confidantes, was killed by sniper fire at his vacation home near the town of Tartus on the Syrian coast. Sulayman was responsible for strategic links between Syria and Iran and Hizbollah and also for the Syrian nuclear project. In these two instances as well Bashar desisted

from responding or blaming Israel, and left the work to the Hizbollah leadership (in the case of Mughniyyah's assassination) and to the Arab and foreign media (in the case of Sulayman's assassination).<sup>7</sup>

However it seems there was little new in all this. In April and July 2001, Israeli jets attacked Syrian military positions in Lebanon in response to Hizbollah attacks on Israeli strongholds along the Israeli-Lebanese border. A number of Syrian soldiers were killed and several were wounded in the attacks. In August 2003 and then in June 2006, Israeli jets flew over the Syrian president's palace near his hometown of Qardaha in northern Syria. In August 2003 the intention was to impress on the Syrian president the need to restrain Hizbollah activity along the border between Israel and Lebanon, and in June 2006 the move followed an attack by Hamas on the Gazan border with Israel, in which two IDF soldiers were killed and the soldier Gilad Shalit was captured. On October 7, 2003, Israeli jets attacked an abandoned training base of the Popular Front-General Command (PFLP-GC) of Ahmad Jabril in 'Ayn Sahab, about six kilometers northeast of Damascus in the heart of Syrian sovereign territory. That was the first time since the 1973 Yom Kippur War that Israeli jets attacked a target in the heart of Syria. The attack came in response to a suicide attack by the Damascus-based Islamic Jihad organization at the Maxim restaurant in Haifa, which killed twenty-two Israelis. No Syrian response followed any of these events, and this so-called non-response indicated Damascus' acceptance that Israel enjoys complete freedom of action over its skies and in its territory.<sup>8</sup>

The lack of any reaction by Damascus to the aforementioned events appeared surprising, as this pattern of passiveness defied Syria's fiery rhetoric, similar to what was voiced following the Second Lebanon War, and to the aggressive and even hasty and temperamental behavior that Israel has tended to attribute to Syria, such as the conduct that led to the outbreak of the 1967 Six Day War. Many in Israel also sought to compare reality in Syria to Israel, where any security event in the country – even the most insignificant – could cause a public and media storm, not to mention hysteria, that could force any government to respond, often in an ill-considered manner and against the leaders' better judgment.

### Syrian Realism and Restraint

Closer examination of the past reveals that Syria's passiveness, or even a policy of non-response to Israel, not only is not surprising but is in fact deep seated in the nature of the Syrian regime and its leaders, and also in their sober recognition of Syria's strategic reality, not to say strategic weakness, which ultimately dictates the actions by its leaders.

In this context, certain observations should be made. First, the lack of any response by Syria each time Israel chooses to act against it ultimately testifies to Syria's measured and realistic vision of the balance of power between the two countries. Therefore it appears that despite heated statements in the Syrian media and sometimes of the Syrian leadership as well, there is a sober recognition in Damascus – both among the Syrian leadership and the general public – of Israel's clear military advantage over Syria and the lack of anything to achieve through military engagement. In this respect the lessons of the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War are still strong in Syria's collective memory, whereby everything possible should be done to keep Syria outside the circle of confrontation with Israel. The Second Lebanon War, when Israel caused widespread damage in Lebanon, presumably reinforced Syrian recognition of Israel's clear military advantage over one of its neighbors.

Second, it appears that the tendency of the regime towards passivity and its preference for inaction over militant and hasty conduct are part of the Syrian DNA. After the disengagement agreement between Israel and Syria was signed in 1974, Syrian president Hafez al-Asad generally avoided any direct military move against Israel, including responses to Israeli activity, even to moves that Damascus considered provocative. This passiveness and pattern of non-action by Asad Sr, incidentally, was not specific to Israel but also to most of his other areas of activity, particularly on the domestic front – i.e., social and economic matters – and it seems this has been inherited, at least in some respects, by his son Bashar. At the same time, Hafez el-Asad, and in his wake his son, pursued an indirect approach based predominantly on the use against

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Israel of Palestinian and Lebanese terror organizations for the purposes of taking revenge, or of promoting Syrian interests that he was hard-pressed to advance with direct Syrian measures, political or military. This indirect approach was therefore designed to compensate for the preference to not confront Israel, while generating and maintaining a balance of fear whereby the Lebanese and Palestinian arenas, through Lebanese and Palestinian actors and not necessarily Syrian actors, become the theater of activity for Syria.<sup>9</sup>

Many commentators in Israel tend to project modes of behavior onto Syria from the experience of other Arab countries. Yet in contrast with the general impression gained in Israel on more than one occasion and certainly in complete contrast with Israel, in the events mentioned here no pressure was felt in Syria from public opinion or from the various different power players there, in particular the armed forces and the ruling party, to respond militarily to Israel.

In many respects Syria is still lags behind by many years, compared with the reality of life in Israel and Western countries and even with other Arab countries. The pace of life in Syria is slow, and the Syrian establishment – the media, and certainly the decision making establishment – is complex and cumbersome, and progress occurs slowly. The Syria media is controlled completely by the regime and as such the media is official and dull, and also primitive and undeveloped.

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For example, there are almost no active websites in Syria in social or economic fields, nor in the area of news reports, and access by the Syrian population to Arab and foreign websites is limited. It is no wonder, therefore, that Syria does not have the dynamic and pressuring media and the same hurried pace of events as in Israel that sometimes leaves the Israeli political leadership with no choice, if it values its political survival, other than to respond quickly and resolutely to events, and on occasion even without due consideration and restraint. It also appears

that the Arab public in general and the Syrian public in particular, notwithstanding the myth of the political strength of the Arab street that invariably tends towards incitement and power intoxication, do

not carry with them the same historical baggage as the Israeli public that frequently evokes reactions of hysteria and panic that in turn impact on the decision making process of the Israeli government.

The Syrian public does not, therefore, display tense expectation of a military response by Syria to anything perceived by Damascus to be provocation or aggression by Israel. This indicates acceptance and internalization of the rules of the game between Israel and Syria and recognition that Israel enjoys total military superiority over Syria, even if complemented by the awareness that Syria can respond indirectly and no less painfully through Lebanese and Palestinian terror organizations – what is generally the case. Indeed, such a response has in the past proven to be no less efficient than a direct military response while absolving Syria of entanglement in a direct confrontation with Israel.

The position of the Arab public in general and the Syrian public in particular on a response to Israel also reflects recognition of the historic role filled by Syria in the Arab-Israeli conflict. This recognition is rooted in the self-image of the Syrian regime and in the expectations that it itself generates in all matters relating to how it deals with Israel. It perceives itself in the role of historic gatekeeper of the strong fortress of Arabism that stands firm against the storms that batter its gates, and survives these storms without raising the white flag. The emphasis, therefore, is on standing firm against Israel and refusing to bow one's head and accepting its dictates and terms, and not responding violently, which would lead to an illogical, ill considered, and uncalculated provocation toward confrontation.

Indeed, therein lies one of the main differences between Syria and Hizbollah, and certainly in all matters relating to their image in the Arab public. Hizbollah, in complete contrast to Syria, consistently takes pains to nurture and preserve at all costs its image as an organization that refuses to turn the other cheek to Israel. It demonstrates zero patience towards Israel and towards what is considered provocation by Israel. This was deemed an important factor in establishing and maintaining the deterrent equation between Hizbollah and Israel. As a result, over the years Hizbollah always responded rapidly to any Israeli action, even if in relation to an unintentional attack on Lebanese shepherds who crossed the Israeli-Lebanese border by mistake, or flocks of sheep that wandered from Lebanon into Israel.



Syria is a different case. This is a country that does not respond hastily, and its strength does not necessarily translate into proud insistence on an immediate settling of accounts with Israel. Syria thus wants to present itself as one whose power lies in determination and steadfast adherence to opinions rather than impulsive military responses, despite any attacks it suffers and the pressure to react. Its greatness, in its own eyes and in the eyes of Arab public opinion, lies in its ability to maintain its standing as a foundation of radical anti-Israelism and anti-Westernism in the Middle East that does not follow the American lead and is in no hurry to normalize its relations with Israel. This is the core of Syria's strength and an asset that keeps the historic conflict between Israel and the Arabs from moving to an arena where Syria enjoys no advantage over Israel. On the contrary, these are arenas in which it suffers from inferiority and shortcomings. This Syrian policy is, therefore, based on survival at all costs, and does not necessarily advance Syria in any way – politically, socially, or even economically. This policy has left Syria in political isolation, in constant military tension, and in an underdeveloped economic state, whereby the heavy price was paid by the inhabitants – but this subject lies beyond the scope of this article.

This pattern of action by Syria was long evident during the regime of Hafez al-Asad in the 1970s and 1980s towards the challenges Syria faced at the time, especially the peace initiative of Anwar Sadat in November 1977, which led to the signing of the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in March 1979. This was followed by Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights in December 1981 and the First Lebanon War in 1982 (Operation Peace for the Galilee), in which Israel challenged Damascus' regional status and especially Syria's standing in Lebanon. Yet Hafez al-Asad refrained from any direct confrontation with Israel, even when in 1982 he found himself forced by Israel into a confrontation in Lebanon. This Syrian mode of behavior was expressed in the official term used by the Syrians in those years to define their policy and behavior towards Israel: *al-sumud wal-tasadi* – endurance and extrication in the face of challenge. This term incorporated two components designed to express the two stages of Syria's conduct towards Israel. The first stage, relevant to the reality of Syria in the 1980s, is the stage of endurance (*sumud*), a stage characterized by a battle of restraint that incorporates



a great degree of passiveness in the face of the Israeli-Zionist challenge (indeed, like the Palestinians who are also surviving on their homeland – *samidun*). The second stage is extrication from the challenge (*tasadi*), which involves a great degree of action and even initiative, even when the initiative is designed to disrupt the moves and initiatives of the other side and not necessarily spearhead a proactive Syrian move. Interestingly, the term *tasadi* is used by Syria to denote interception, for example interception of enemy jets.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Mumana'a and Muqawama***

Today the popular terms used in Syria to express Syria's way of dealing with Israel are *mumana'a* and *muqawama*, expressing passive resistance alongside aid and support for anyone who nonetheless follows a course of active resistance to Israel. In other words, these terms express Syria's strategic decision not to become embroiled in a confrontation with Israel and to make do with passive resistance while leaving active resistance to others, mainly Hizbollah and Palestinian terror organizations.

These terms were used, for example, in an address given by Syrian president Bashar al-Asad to the military leadership of the ruling Baath party in Syria on April 20, 2008: "The more it became apparent that we are determined to maintain our fierce position and our adherence to our Arabism, [the more] the actions [taken by the enemy against us] became increasingly cruel. But we maintain that active and passive resistance (*muqawama* and *mumana'a*) are part of our strategic decision to which we intend to adhere."<sup>11</sup>

In Arabic there is a clear differentiation between these two terms, as follows: *qawam* means "resisted," "stood up and stood up to," and "struggled against." On the other hand, *mana'a* means "struggled against or contended with," "opposed," "competed for... against," "divested or prevented...from," "defended." This leads to a translation and understanding of the term *muqawama* as "active resistance" as opposed to *mumana'a*, which means passive resistance or even non-violent resistance.

The Syrian ambassador to the UK, Sami al-Khaymi, explained the meaning of these terms in an interview to the Lebanese television channel ANB: "Arab countries are concerned over Israel, but not Syria, which has adopted the principle of a passive resistance country (*dawlat*

*mumana'a*). The meaning of *mumana'a* for Syria is not confrontation, due to Israel's military might, and mainly due to the military might of the United States, which is capable of conquering and swallowing up a large number of European countries – but resistance to ideas that the US proposes and advances."<sup>12</sup>

These ideas were also raised clearly in an interview given by a member of the Syrian People's Assembly, Muhammad Habbash, in an interview to Lebanese satellite television channel al-Manar belonging to Hizbollah, just prior to the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War but against a backdrop of increasing tension in Israeli-Syrian relations. Habbash explained in the interview:

The Syrian public is incensed. There are those who wonder about the position of the armed forces [the Syrian armed forces, which desist from attacking Israel on the Golan Heights front]. The Syrian people will not continue to stand idly by. Although it treats its leaders' decisions with respect [the official position that believes in abstaining from any action against Israel] it is likely to be pushed not only towards passive resistance (*mumana'a*) but also towards active resistance (*muqawama*), like Hizbollah, and even towards being proactive [as in the decision to embark on the Yom Kippur War], if it is convinced there will be benefit to be gained from that. Nevertheless, it is clear to all that the decision on confrontation is a military matter entrusted to the military commanders and the country's leaders.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Syrian discourse takes pains to stress that Syria has chosen to be a wall that will deflect and destroy US and Israeli pressure on the Arabs to succumb. Herein lies Syria's historic role, and not specifically in active resistance to its enemies. Similar ideas were expressed by Hasan al-Ahmad Hasan in the government organ *al-Thawra* on December 7, 2007:

The pact of resistance (*muqawama*) stretches from Iran to Syria, and joins with the resistance of Iraq, the Palestinians, and even of Lebanon. This pact grew and strengthened due to the failure of US policy that was designed to neutralize the strength of the region's countries. The United States failed despite its military might, which allowed it to conquer a sovereign country [Iraq] against

international legitimacy....Syria is the security valve and the cornerstone of the building of resistance, which is built on it. Without Syria the entire building of resistance will collapse. Syria is responsible for the effort to stand firm and to honorably protect the interests of the nation; it is responsible for the flow of blood in the veins of the nation, for the effort to prevent the progress and implementation of aggressive plans that will damage the region and the Arabs.<sup>14</sup>

In an article in the Syrian regime's organ *Tishrin* on November 15, 2006, 'Ali al-Sawan noted that passive resistance (*mumana'a*) is a policy adopted and embraced by Syria over the years since the Arab uprising of 1916 (during the Ottoman Empire) and up to the outbreak of the 2003 Iraq War. Following the war in Iraq US secretary of state Colin Powell threatened Syrian president Bashar al-Asad and reminded him that the United States military was deployed along the Syrian border, while Bashar al-Asad refused to give in and succumb to American dictates. There were many, for example "the new liberals" (a denigrating term for the liberal intellectual camp in Syria), and many in Lebanon (implying the anti-Syrian March 14 camp), who sought to exert pressure on Syria and even claimed that the time for concessions had come and that the principle of passive resistance should be expunged from Arab discourse. However, Syria clung to its approach and remained committed to the legitimacy of resistance, and thanks to this approach the Americans became mired in Iraq.<sup>15</sup> Finally, 'Izz al-Din Darwish, editor of *Tishrin*, wrote in the August 23, 2007 issue:

Syria is in the enemy's sights, not due to a defect in its policies or positions but because the United States and Israel are looking to damage it, in order to dissuade it from its decision to adhere to the option of passive resistance (*mumana'a*) and because they do not want it to disseminate its positions that oppose the plans of Israel for an American Middle East and talks of summits and meetings that bear the name of "peace" in vain, but that are designed to advance normalization alone.

In the editorial published by 'Izz al-Din Darwish in *Tishrin* to mark the Syrian Day of Independence, the Evacuation Day, on April 17, 2008, he added: "Evacuation Day reinforces Syria in its stance against the occupation, the aggression, and violence, in its decision to adopt a

policy of passive resistance (*mumana'a*) and of adherence to Arab rights, and its decision to defy American and Israeli pressure and threats.”

Syrian opposition parties, like the enemies of the Syrian regime in the Arab world, have not hesitated to castigate what they perceive to be Syrian hypocrisy and two-facedness, the fact that while Syria glorifies itself as hawkish in the struggle against Israel, in practice it is doing nothing against the Zionist enemy. In their eyes Syria's policy, passive resistance (*mumana'a*) means passiveness, not to say idleness and cowardice in the face of the enemy. In an article published in *al-Hayat* on October 24, 2006, member of the Syrian opposition Yasin al-Haj Salah explained:

Passive resistance means turning our back on the enemy, and although it concerns adhering to our position as far as possible, this is based on avoiding confrontation (*muwaja-ha*) with the enemy and accepting its dictates. This, then, is an interim situation between action that may develop into limitless confrontation (*majabha maftuha*) and ceding to the enemy. In passive resistance our back is turned towards the enemy, but we stand firm and do not go anywhere, while in contrast with what the Damascus propagandists are trying to tell us, passive resistance is not a single moment or one stage in the dynamics of confrontation (*muwa-jaha*) – a moment during which we wait for the appropriate opportunity to proceed to a stage where we take the initiative. On the contrary, in practice passive resistance (*mumana'a*) is one moment along a path of endless retreat in which the Syrian regime – which adopts a policy of passive resistance – is surrounded by the enemy and does not make an effort to take the initiative. This involves being two faced, as the supporters of passive resistance (*ahl al-mumana'a*) [members of the Syrian regime] turn their back on the enemy and prefer to confront the society in which they live [Syrian society]. It is as if they are saying: the war is taking place here at home [against our own people] while there [against Israel] we are conducting passive resistance.

Clearer and more strident words were written by Rami al-Rayis, who is responsible for information in the party of the anti-Syrian Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, the progressive Lebanese social party, in an article he published in the *al-Anba'* newspaper, which he edits: “Passive