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SYRIA'S ROLE IN THE CURRENT ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFRONTATION

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Early in the morning of June 27, Israel Air Force planes broke the sound barrier as they flew over the palace of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad in the Asad family's hometown of Qardaha. That action was apparently driven by a lesson learned from a similar overflight four years before, in the fall of 2002, which was intended to warn Asad against escalation of the situation on the Israeli-Lebanese border but failed to impress him because he was completely unaware of the overflight at the time and only learned about it from Israeli media reports several weeks after the event.

The latest Israeli overflight came two days after Hamas activists attacked an Israeli army position on the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip and managed to abduct an Israel soldier and spirit him back to Gaza. That attack was apparently carried out on the direct orders of the Hamas leadership based in Damascus, especially the Chairman of the movement's Political Bureau, Khaled Mash'al. Thus, the IAF overflight was meant to send a clear warning to Asad that continued support of Mash'al and his comrades could cost Syria dearly.

Up till now, however, the overflight has

produced no discernible results and Asad has apparently chosen to ignore the Israeli signal and to persist in his course. At first, the Syrian media totally ignored the Israeli overflight; only after it was widely covered by Israeli media did the Syrians hasten to report that their air defenses had driven off Israeli warplanes that had penetrated Syria airspace. Syrian spokesmen also condemned the "Israeli aggression" and repeatedly insisted that the Hamas people living in Damascus under Syrian protection confined themselves to political and informational work and had no involvement in the military activity against Israel carried out by Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza.

Hamas is not the only Palestinian terrorist organization with operational headquarters in Syria. The others include the Islamic Jihad, led by Ramadan Shallah, and Ahmad Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, which operates against Israel mostly from Lebanon. All these headquarters enjoy full freedom of maneuver in Syria, which allows them to raise funds (mostly from Iran) and transfer them to the territory of the Palestinian Authority as well as to prepare plans and

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transmit orders without having to worry about interference by Israeli security services.

Syria continues to support these terrorist organizations even though it has been under severe pressure for several years to stop doing so. This pressure is part of a wider campaign led by Washington to secure Syrian cooperation on a range of issues, including the threat of radical Islamist terrorism in Iraq and the question of Lebanon. American efforts to coerce Syria began after the American occupation of Iraq in the spring of 2003 and reached a peak in 2005, following the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February of that year, when a UN commission of inquiry strongly hinted that Bashar al-Asad was implicated in the assassination.

However, the international pressure on Syria has substantially subsided since early 2006. The Americans backed off from accusations that Syria was responsible for the terrorism in Iraq, and the head of the UN commission, the German judge Detlev Mhlis, was replaced by a Belgian investigator; Serge Brammertz, who has taken a much more muted position on the question of Syrian culpability in the murder of Hariri. Finally, France, a key member of the international coalition demanding the removal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, has shown less enthusiasm for continuing pressure to end other sorts of Syrian involvement in Lebanon.

These developments explain the relative complacency of Bashar al-Asad in the face of the latest Israeli threats. He undoubtedly believes that these threats are just as hollow as a string of previous Israeli and American threats also turned out to be, notwithstanding the presence of more than a hundred thousand American troops just to

the east in Iraq.

Consequently, Bashar has stuck to his strategic position and refuses to entertain the idea of responding to any of these pressures without some politically significant *quid pro quo* (such as revival of negotiations with Israel over the Golan Heights) or of abandoning his policy of providing support for Palestinian terrorist organizations, especially Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Indeed, Bashar has apparently concluded that standing firm in the face of American and Israeli pressure not only will not weaken him domestically but will actually enable him to mobilize broader public support both at home and throughout the rest of the Arab world. Moreover, in adopting this posture, he runs very little risk of American or Israeli military action because such action – however threatening the rhetoric may seem – is not a viable option for either Washington or Jerusalem.

In fact, the Syrians apparently think that their standing in the region has improved and that they have regained the central role that the Bush Administration has tried to deny them. After all, would-be mediators are coming to Syria and requesting Bashar's help in resolving the current Israeli-Palestinian crisis, because it seems that the road to Khaled Mash'al, hence, to the release of the captured Israeli soldier, must pass through Damascus. It is therefore not surprising that Bashar has chosen to ignore the Israeli overflight of his palace, just as he has ignored other signals sent by Israel and the United States over the past six years.

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