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SYRIA'S ROLE IN THE ISRAEL-HIZBULLAH CONFRONTATION

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The confrontation between Israel and Hizbullah that has unfolded since the abduction of two soldiers on July 12 has prompted considerable speculation about future Syrian policy. One school of thought argues that Syria under President Bashar al-Asad will not stop at the brink and will actively support Hizbullah. However, the regime's behavior in this confrontation suggests that a rational calculation of vital interests will prompt Asad to adopt a pragmatic stance.

In contrast to the recklessness sometimes attributed to him in Israel and elsewhere, Asad has thus far managed to stop at the brink. Hizbullah has certainly tried to implicate Syria in the conflict by circulating reports that Israel has bombed targets deep inside Syria, by firing rockets at the Golan Heights, and by using Syrian-supplied missiles (Ra'ad 1) against Haifa. But those efforts have failed to achieve the desired result. Determined to avoid a confrontation with Israel, Syria immediately denied that it had been bombed and it has refrained from any direct intervention. Moreover, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal al-Mikdad has strenuously refuted charges that Syria was the source of trucks carrying supplies of ammunition for Hizbullah that were attacked by the Israeli Air Force, and

the Syrian regime has even asked that the U.S. and the international community involve it any negotiations to end the fighting. Finally, the political support Syria has given Hizbullah has been relatively restrained and, as Syria's behavior at the Arab Summit Conference suggests, whatever support it does provide stems largely from the regime's desire to preserve its ties with a leading element in domestic Lebanese politics. Maintaining a link with Hizbullah allows Syria to remain a relevant actor in the Lebanese system.

Syrian behavior points to two main conclusions. The first is that the regime is determined to continue playing a major role in domestic Lebanese affairs, consistent with the Syrian belief that developments in Lebanon are critical to Syrian national security as well as the historical conviction that Lebanon is actually part of Syria. The second is that Syria wants to show a pragmatic face that could help extricate it from the international isolation it is currently experiencing and eventually even from the Iranian bear-hug. It is possible that Iran, through its commitment to come to Syria's aid in the event of an Israeli attack, was trying to prompt Asad's regime to intervene more actively to defend Hizbullah, lest its missile capabilities be destroyed (according to some analysts, Hizbullah

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missiles are a component of Iran's deterrent against an Israeli or western attack on Iran's nuclear infrastructure). If so, Syria's refusal to become actively involved in hostilities indicates that the regime is not prepared to sacrifice itself for the sake of either Hizbullah or Iran.

Notwithstanding the criticism leveled by Israel and the west at Asad's leadership and decision-making, the very fact that he heads a secular and minority regime under domestic threat forces him to behave with a certain degree of restraint and to confront domestic extremists who aspire to replace his regime with an Islamic republic, and in this he shares a common interest with Israel. If the regime were overthrown, its successor would not be led by enlightened liberal democrats. Any political vacuum would almost surely be filled by the same sort of extreme Islamists now embittering the lives of Iraqis. And even if this scenario does not oblige others to come to terms with the regime's support for Palestinian and Hizbullah terror, the current Syrian reality nevertheless appears preferable to the reality of Iraq or Afghanistan.

The Alawi-controlled regime in Syria is in a very delicate position. On one hand, the Alawis are widely perceived as heretics among the Sunni majority, which would like to replace them with a Sunni-dominated regime. At the same time, the regime is very sensitive to regional developments, and especially to the Lebanon issue. There is a basic understanding in Syria that if the regime becomes too closely aligned with one faction in Lebanon, it will invite more vigorous opposition from the other factions (and their external backers). Various considerations do not permit the regime to cut Syria off completely from Hizbullah; that explains the expressions of verbal encouragement and the organization of public demonstrations of sympathy. But even if Syria has sent some weapons to Hizbullah, that falls far short of the openly-declared and uncompromising assistance

one might expect for a real strategic ally. At the same time, moreover, Syria refuses to sever links with all other factions and confessional groups in Lebanon.

Israel will find it difficult to completely disarm Hizbullah through its own military means. Accomplishing that objective will require a determined effort by the Lebanese army, and the chances of that happening are minimal. Furthermore, the mere introduction into Lebanon of another multi-national force is unlikely to persuade Hizbullah to voluntarily give up whatever weapons it retains, and the attempt to do so may well stimulate Hizbullah to step up terrorist attacks against western targets in Lebanon and abroad.

The withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon led Hizbullah to build up its forces and, at the ideological level, to stress the Islamist character of its activities, and the idea of exporting the Islamic revolution to Lebanon will not fade away if Hizbullah, as seems likely, survives the current Israeli military campaign. Consequently, there is not a high probability that Hizbullah can be disarmed without active Syrian intervention. What could prompt Syria to undertake such an intervention is a package of incentives, of which the most appealing would be the reassertion of Syrian political hegemony in Lebanon, while preserving the domestic balance as outlined in the Ta'ef Agreement (although those who agree to such a "carrot" might well demand that Syria disarm the Palestinian militias along with Hizbullah). However, the moment for a Syrian intervention of this sort may be "ripe" only if the domestic Lebanese contest between the Christian-Druze-Sunni coalition and Hizbullah turns violent.

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