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ASAD'S DECLARATIONS: AMBIGUOUS WORDS, CLEAR MEANING

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The recent series of interviews with Syrian President Bashar Asad in Arab and Western media reveals the extent of changes in the Middle East, in general, and Syria, in particular, in the wake of the confrontation between Israel and Hizbullah in the summer of 2006. Before that conflict, Asad hardly ever mentioned "Israeli aggression against Syria that can end in war" or the "state of alert" in the Syrian army, but since then, Asad has repeatedly stressed the readiness of his military forces.

The latest confrontation, whatever the assessment may be of its tactical aspects, is seen by many in the Arab and Muslim world as Israel's worst strategic failure since the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Israel's inability to destroy Hizbullah's organizational and physical infrastructure has only strengthened the belief of many that Israel is a weak entity that can be shaken to its very foundations through violence and terror. The perception that the summer war ended in a victory for Hizbullah has led the Alawite regime in Damascus to tighten its links with the "victor" and even to signal a readiness to adopt Hizbullah's operational methods and policies.

Assad's latest declarations reflect his (and his regime's) growing self-confidence. From his perspective, Syria is now in a "win-win" situation; every development will play to its advantage. A glance through the Syrian prism at three possible scenarios shows how might all be expected to develop positively:

1. *initiation of negotiations for a comprehensive Syrian-Israeli peace agreement* – Since Assad sees himself as someone who "bet" on the right cards (closer ties with Iran and support for Hizbullah) and won the strategic contest with Israel, he can go into negotiations with maximal demands: total Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, "dipping his feet" in the Sea of Galilee, and major Israeli concessions on the Palestinian issue. Extracting these gains from a weakened Israel unwilling to risk a clash with Syria would allow the Syrian President to depict himself as one who refused to make concessions in a political process and, consequently, did not harm his regime's legitimacy or do damage to collective Arab dignity;

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2. *launching a "popular struggle" to regain the Golan* – If negotiations do not begin (or begin but break off in failure), Syria might resort to a limited violent struggle. In an interview with Dubai Television on 23 August, Asad explicitly declared: "The limits of our patience will be shown soon and I have already said that the present generation is the last generation prepared to accept the peace process. Therefore, our patience will run out with this generation. That means that [when patience runs out] the people will turn to resistance, which is a popular and not governmental path." Even if that "resistance" is not so "popular" and is actually institutionalized and subject to the absolute control of the Syrian security agencies, such a struggle would attract support, not only in the Arab and Muslim arenas – because it would be a struggle to restore conquered land and protect Arab honor in the long run -- but also in the international arena – because the Golan is seen as Israeli-occupied territory. Such a confrontation would also tie Israel's hands. On the one hand, it would lack the international legitimacy to launch a full-scale military attack on Syria. On the other hand, at least in the eyes of the Syrian regime, Israel would suffer from the same inefficiencies and weaknesses against a guerrilla force that it experienced in Lebanon.
3. *a major Israeli war against Syria* – Since Asad sees Israel's power to threaten as having been eroded by the results of the campaign against Hizbullah, he may suspect Israel of wanting to rehabilitate its reputation by launching a major military action against Syria. The Syrian

ruler judges that his army is prepared for such an eventuality and makes frequent declarations about Syrian readiness. Blocking an Israeli military initiative would enhance the regime's legitimacy, bring honor to Syria and further discredit Israel's deterrent; yet another military setback might well bring Israel to acquiesce in Syrian demands and permit the regime to achieve all its goals in negotiations. But even if the Syrian army were unable to inflict a defeat on Israel, Asad apparently assumes that the survival of his regime would not be threatened because he would still be portrayed as someone who stood up to "Zionist aggression."

Regime survival is the highest value in Syrian national security policy and that prompts Asad and those working under him to do everything to strengthen their legitimacy. In the eyes of the regime, strengthening ties with the Hizbullah-Iran axis has already borne fruit in this regard and all that remains now is to pick the fruit, whether by political or military means.

Given the Arab and Muslim perception of Israeli failure in Lebanon, Syria is now trying to launch a policy that will change the status quo vis-à-vis Israel. The regime would prefer to bring about that change by negotiating from the position of strength that it believes it now holds in light of Israel's defeat. But if negotiations do not take place or, alternatively, if they fail because of Israeli refusal to satisfy Syrian demands, that could bring the regime to adopt Hizbullah's methods and shatter the quiet that has prevailed along the Syrian-Israeli line of separation for more than three decades.

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