

**DRUMS OF WAR:  
ISRAEL AND THE “AXIS OF RESISTANCE”**

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## **DRUMS OF WAR: ISRAEL AND THE “AXIS OF RESISTANCE”**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Of all the explanations why calm has prevailed in the Israeli-Lebanese arena since the end of the 2006 war, the principal one also should be cause for greatest concern: fear among the parties that the next confrontation would be far more devastating and broader in scope. None of the most directly relevant actors – Israel, Hizbollah, Syria and Iran – relishes this prospect, so all, for now, are intent on keeping their powder dry. But the political roots of the crisis remain unaddressed, the underlying dynamics are still explosive, and miscalculations cannot be ruled out. The only truly effective approach is one that would seek to resume – and conclude – meaningful Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese peace talks. There is no other answer to the Hizbollah dilemma and, for now, few better ways to affect Tehran’s calculations. Short of such an initiative, deeper political involvement by the international community is needed to enhance communications between the parties, defuse tensions and avoid costly missteps.

Four years after the last war, the situation in the Levant is paradoxical. It is exceptionally quiet and uniquely dangerous, both for the same reason. The build-up in military forces and threats of an all-out war that would spare neither civilians nor civilian infrastructure, together with the worrisome prospect of its regionalisation, are effectively deterring all sides. Today, none of the parties can soberly contemplate the prospect of a conflict that would be uncontrolled, unprecedented and unscripted.

Should hostilities break out, Israel will want to hit hard and fast to avoid duplicating the 2006 scenario. It will be less likely than in the past to distinguish between Hizbollah and a Lebanese government of which the Shiite movement is an integral part and more likely to take aim at Syria – both because it is the more vulnerable target and because it is Hizbollah’s principal supplier of military and logistical support. Meanwhile, as tensions have risen, the so-called “axis of resistance” – Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hizbollah – has been busy intensifying security ties. Involvement by one in the event of attack against another no longer can be dismissed as idle speculation.

Other restraining elements are at play. UN Security Council Resolution 1701 led to a thickening of the Lebanese and international armed presence in southern Lebanon after the 2006 war, which has constrained Hizbollah’s freedom of action while simultaneously putting the brakes on any potential Israeli military ambition. Even as both sides routinely criticise and violate the resolution – which concurrently called for the end of arms transfers to Lebanon’s non-governmental forces, disarmament of its armed groups and full respect for the country’s sovereignty – they continue to value the framework defined by it as an integral component of the status quo.

Hizbollah’s enhanced political status in Lebanon is an additional inhibiting factor, discouraging it from initiatives that could imperil those gains. Israel’s current government – its reputation notwithstanding – appears less inclined at this point to take the risk twice taken by its more centrist predecessor of initiating hostilities, seeking to prove it can maintain stability and worried about a more hostile international environment. Despite voicing alarm at Hizbollah’s military growth, it has displayed restraint. U.S. President Barack Obama, likewise, far from the one-time dream of a new Middle East harboured by his predecessor, has no appetite for a conflagration that would jeopardise his peace efforts and attempts to restore U.S. credibility in the region. All of which explains why the border area has witnessed fewer violent incidents than at any time in decades.

But that is only the better half of the story. Beneath the surface, tensions are mounting with no obvious safety valve. The deterrence regime has helped keep the peace, but the process it perpetuates – mutually reinforcing military preparations; Hizbollah’s growing and more sophisticated arsenal; escalating Israeli threats – pulls in the opposite direction and could trigger the very outcome it has averted so far. If Israel would not like a war, it does not like what it is seeing either.

It is not clear what would constitute a red line whose crossing by the Shiite movement would prompt Israeli military action, but that lack of clarity provides additional cause for anxiety. Unlike in the 1990s, when the Israel-Lebanon Monitoring Group, operating with U.S., French and Syrian participation, ensured some form of inter-party contacts and minimal adherence to agreed rules of the game, and when Washington and Damascus were involved in intensive dialogue, today there is no effective forum for communication and thus ample room for misunderstanding and misperception.

Meanwhile, an underground war of espionage and assassinations has been raging, for now a substitute for more open confrontation. The parties might not want a full-scale shooting war, but under these circumstances one or the other could provoke an unwanted one. Further contributing to a sense of paralysis has been lack of movement on any 1701-related file, from the seemingly easiest – Israel's withdrawal from the northern (Lebanese) part of the village of Ghajar – to the most complex, including policing the Lebanese-Syrian border, resolving the status of Shebaa Farms, disarming Hizbollah and ending Israeli overflights. Such paralysis feeds scepticism that anything can be achieved and, over time, could wear down the commitment of contributors to the UN peacekeeping force (UNIFIL).

The key to unlocking this situation is – without neglecting the central Israeli-Palestinian track – to resume meaningful negotiations between Israel on the one hand and Syria and Lebanon on the other. This is the only realistic way to shift underlying dynamics and, in particular, affect Syria's calculations. Without that, Damascus will continue to transfer weapons to Hizbollah, the Shiite movement will successfully resist pressure to disarm and Israel will keep on violating Lebanon's sovereignty.

There is scant reason for optimism on the peace front, however. That means little can be achieved, not that nothing can be done. The most urgent tasks are to restore momentum on 1701 by focusing on the most realistic goals and to establish consultative mechanisms to defuse tensions, clarify red lines and minimise risks of an accidental confrontation. Better channels of communication would help. At present, the U.S. is talking mainly to one side (Israel), keeping another at arm's length (Syria), ignoring a third (Hizbollah) and confronting the fourth (Iran). The UN might not have that problem, but it has others. It has too many overlapping and uncoordinated missions and offices dealing with Lebanon and the peace process and thus lacks policy coherence. One option would be to empower its mission in Lebanon so that it can play a more effective political role.

Nobody should be under the illusion that solving Ghajar, beefing up the UN's role or even finding new, creative means of communication between Israel, Syria and, indirectly, Hizbollah, would make a lasting or decisive difference. They undoubtedly would help. But Lebanon's crises for the most part are derivative of broader regional tensions; until serious efforts are mounted to resolve the latter, the former will persist. In the meantime, the world should cross its fingers that fear of a catastrophic conflict will continue to be reason enough for the parties not to provoke one.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **To the U.S. Government:**

1. Intensify efforts, including at the presidential level, to re-launch Israeli-Syrian and, as a consequence, Israeli-Lebanese peace negotiations in parallel to Israeli-Palestinian talks, persuading Prime Minister Netanyahu to reiterate the commitment made by past Israeli leaders to a full withdrawal to the lines of 1967 assuming all other Israeli needs are met.
2. Initiate a high-level and sustained dialogue with Syria aimed at defining both a clear and credible pathway toward improved bilateral relations and a compelling regional role for Damascus in the aftermath of a peace agreement.
3. Press, in the context of resumed peace talks, Syria to halt weapons transfers to Hizbollah and Israel to cease actions in violation of Lebanese sovereignty.

### **To the UN Security Council:**

4. Ask the Secretary-General to review the various missions and offices dealing with Lebanon and the Middle East peace process, with the aim of developing a more coherent and comprehensive policy and enhancing coordination among them.

### **To the UN Secretariat:**

5. Consider, in the interim, consolidating implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 in the office of the Special Coordinator (UNSCOL), with a view to more effective engagement with the various parties.

### **To the UN and the Governments of Israel and Lebanon:**

6. Revive momentum toward implementation of Resolution 1701, focusing on the most immediately achievable goals, by:

- a) pursuing discussions toward resolution of the status of Ghajar, under which Israel would withdraw from the northern (Lebanese) part, and UNIFIL would assume control, with a Lebanese army presence; and
- b) using such discussions to initiate talks on conditions necessary for attaining a formal ceasefire.

**To UNIFIL troop contributing countries, particularly those in Europe:**

7. Reaffirm commitments to maintain the current level of troop contributions.
8. Pursue a policy of active patrolling, in order to prevent any overt Hizbollah presence in its area of responsibility, while conducting outreach efforts to the civilian population.
9. Investigate, publicly condemn and take appropriate action against flagrant violations of Resolution 1701, particularly attempts to resupply Hizbollah and Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty.

**To the UN and the Governments of the U.S., France, Turkey, Israel, Syria and Lebanon:**

10. Consider establishing a Contact Group or, alternatively, more informal consultative mechanisms, to discuss implementation of Resolution 1701 and address potential flashpoints, focusing on:
  - a) a commitment by relevant parties to refrain from provocative statements and actions;
  - b) an end to implicit or explicit threats to harm civilians or damage civilian infrastructure in any future war;
  - c) a halt to targeted assassinations; and
  - d) immediate intervention in the event of a violent incident so as to de-escalate the crisis.

**To the Government of Lebanon and Hizbollah:**

11. Make every effort to discourage and prevent hostile action by the civilian population against UN personnel and property.

**To the Government of Lebanon:**

12. Substantially increase the number of troops deployed in the South and provide them with enhanced training and equipment.

**Beirut/Jerusalem/Damascus/  
Washington/Brussels, 2 August 2010**

## DRUMS OF WAR: ISRAEL AND THE “AXIS OF RESISTANCE”

### I. A SHIFTING BALANCE OF POWER

In the wake of the 2006 war, both sides – Israel on the one hand, Hizbollah and its allies on the other – took steps aimed at integrating its lessons. Israeli policy-makers engaged in several rounds of intensive internal consultations, vowing any subsequent confrontation would be different, better prepared and conclude more quickly with a far more decisive outcome.<sup>1</sup> Hizbollah adjusted its posture, redeploying deeper within Lebanese territory, swiftly replenishing its stocks and threatening more widespread and effective attacks against Israeli civilian targets. At bottom, each side seemed to agree that, for deterrence purposes – and, in Israel’s case, in order to end the fighting more rapidly should it erupt – it needed to be in a position to maximise damage not only to its adversary’s forces, but also to its civilian infrastructure. Both also hinted – loudly at times, with subtlety at others – that a future war could spread geographically and pull in other regional actors.

The conflict between Israel and Hizbollah tends to be viewed as chronic and cyclical, with upticks in tension or outbreaks of violence being punctuated by intensive, albeit short-lived, diplomatic bursts. In fact, the conflict has evolved in phases, each dissimilar to the previous. Since 2006, it has been fundamentally altered in ways that make it far more threatening.

#### A. A DEADLIER FUTURE BATTLE ...

For Israeli political and military planners, the outcome of the Lebanese and Gaza wars produced mixed messages. Israel displayed overpowering military might and inflicted enormous damage and destruction. In neither conflict, however, could it be said to have produced a clear-cut victory and, in both, the duration and intensity and the substantial harm suffered by civilians produced strong international pressure and condemnation that risked limiting the future margin of manoeuvre of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). In part, this reflected difficulties in adjusting Israel’s traditional military doctrine – based inter alia on the use of force in enemy territory, preventive and preemptive action and quick achievement of specific, limited aims – to asymmetric forms of warfare against non-state actors operating from urban areas.

The conclusion many strategists appear to have reached – and publicised – is that another confrontation would likely be much the same, only with greater intensity in order to “reduce the period of fighting to a minimum and to create an effective balance of deterrence”.<sup>2</sup> In the words of a former defence official, “our hope is that Hizbollah will not attempt anything, for fear that Israel will

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<sup>1</sup> Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, Jerusalem, December 2009. On 30 January 2008, the Winograd Commission, established to investigate the Lebanon war, issued its final reports. Its conclusions were thorough and damning. It found, inter alia, that “the 2nd Lebanon war [was] ... a serious missed opportunity. Israel initiated a long war, which ended without its clear military victory. A semi-military organisation of a few thousand men resisted, for a few weeks, the strongest army in the Middle East, which enjoyed full air superiority and size and technology advantages. The barrage of rockets aimed at Israel’s civilian population lasted throughout the war, and the IDF did not provide an effective response to it”. The commission called for deep changes in political and military preparedness and cautioned that “Israel cannot survive in this region, and cannot live in it in peace or at least non-war, unless people in Israel itself and in its surroundings believe that Israel has the political and military leadership, military capabilities, and social robustness that will allow her to deter those of its neighbors who wish to harm her, and to prevent them – if necessary through the use of military force – from achieving their goal”. [www.cfr.org/publication/15385/winograd\\_commission\\_final\\_report.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/15385/winograd_commission_final_report.html).

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Siboni, “Disproportionate Force: Israel’s Concept of Response in Light of the Second Lebanon War”, The Institute for National Security Studies, Insight no.74, 2 October 2008. He wrote: “Israel’s test will be the intensity and quality of its response to incidents on the Lebanese border or terrorist attacks involving Hizbollah in the north or Hamas in the south .... [I]t will have to respond disproportionately in order to make clear that the State of Israel will accept no attempt to disrupt the calm”. As Isabel Kershner of *The New York Times* put it, the purpose is “to shorten and intensify the period of fighting and to lengthen the period between rounds”, 25 December 2009.

inflict an even more powerful retaliatory strike in response to even a small move. Israel's interest is to maintain maximum ambiguity in terms of how far it might be willing to go".<sup>3</sup>

For ordinary Lebanese, talk of the last war as anything but intense likely rings hollow.<sup>4</sup> But Israeli officials and military planners say they could have done far more and, as Crisis Group reported at the time, targeting was "disproportionate" but not "indiscriminate".<sup>5</sup> The new proposed strategy is known as the "Dahiya doctrine", named after a southern Beirut neighbourhood harbouring key Hizbollah assets and officials that was thoroughly devastated in 2006. As Israel sees it, this is all the more necessary in light of Hizbollah's alleged steps to "hunker down" and store increased amounts of weapons in South Lebanon villages, in civilian homes or adjacent to hospitals and schools.<sup>6</sup> Major General Eizencourt, head of Israel's Northern Command, explained:

What happened to the Dahiya neighbourhood... will happen to each village from which Israel is fired on. We will apply disproportionate force and inflict huge damage and destruction .... The next war must be decided quickly, aggressively, and without seeking international approval .... Hizbollah understands very well that firing from villages will lead to their destruction.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, May 2010.

<sup>4</sup> As a result of the 2006 war, over 1,000 Lebanese were killed; up to one million were displaced; infrastructure – including roads, bridges and runways at Beirut's international airport – was damaged or destroyed; and 15,000 homes and 900 factories, markets, farms, shops and other commercial buildings were wrecked. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°59, *Israel/Hizbollah/Lebanon: Avoiding Renewed Conflict*, 1 November 2006, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Although Israel hit "economic infrastructure bearing little or no relation to Hizbollah", it spared most non-Shiite residential neighbourhoods and major infrastructure, such as telecommunications as well as energy and water-related infrastructure. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> See *Haaretz*, 8 July 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Zaki Shalom, "The IDF's New Response Policy vis-à-vis Hizbollah: How Viable is It?", Institute for National Security Studies, Insight no.76, 28 October 2008. Giora Eiland, former head of the National Security Council, said, "the next round will be different, but not in the way people think. The only way to be successful is to take much harsher action". Quoted in *The New York Times*, 25 December 2009. A senior official concurred: "If terrorists decide to hide themselves among the population, there will be civilian casualties. It is precisely because of this civilian aspect that we hold the government of Lebanon wholly responsible". In a recent statement, Gabi Ashkenazi, chief of staff, of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), underscored the degree to which, in Israel's view, Hizbollah had blended with the civilian population. "Hizbollah ... is building an underground infrastructure of command centres and rocket

Such statements have been echoed in Hizbollah's counter-threats and its own announced strategic shift. In 2006, the Shiite organisation indiscriminately fired rockets but stopped short – for technical or, as it claims, political reasons – of deliberately and massively aiming at civilians. Since then, however, Hasan Nasrallah, the movement's secretary general, has pledged to respond in kind to any Israeli action. In mid-2009, he warned that, unlike in the past, Hizbollah would respond to any Israeli strike against Beirut – including against its own southern suburb stronghold – with equivalent targeting of Tel Aviv.<sup>8</sup> In February 2010, he made the broader claim that any damage inflicted upon Lebanon would be matched with equal damage in Israel – an airport for an airport; a factory for a factory.<sup>9</sup> In May, in the aftermath of large-scale Iranian naval manoeuvres in the Gulf, he vowed to attack all Israel-bound ships were Israel to subject Lebanon to a naval blockade, as it did in 2006.<sup>10</sup> Nasrallah explained:

The Israelis always launched their wars with a safe domestic front. This situation is gone for good. After 2006, this will never be the case again. We have a domestic front, and they have a domestic front, and today we have inaugurated a new era in which we will be bombed and we will bomb, we will be killed and we will kill, we will be displaced and will displace, and this is their current strategic weakness.<sup>11</sup>

launchers, mostly within Shiite villages in southern Lebanon .... Throughout Lebanon, including in southern Lebanon, residential villages were turned into 'surface to surface rocket villages'. See <http://idfspokesperson.com/>, 19 July 2010. On 19 July 2010, Israel released its submission to the UN Secretary-General on the Gaza war, in which it asserted it would take steps in future wars to limit civilian casualties. Asked whether this would have an impact on the so-called Dahiya doctrine, Israeli officials conceded it could impose some restrictions but that it would not make the approach "void or irrelevant". Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials and former officials, Jerusalem, July 2010. Of interest, one official claimed that Israeli and U.S. counterparts were engaged in intensive discussions on guidelines for possible future Israeli warfare with Hamas, Hizbollah and Iran. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010.

<sup>8</sup> *Al-Manar*, 18 August 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Lebanese National News Agency, 16 February 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Lebanese National News Agency, 25 May 2010.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Timor Goksel, the former spokesman for UN forces in Lebanon, said, "in 2006, Hizbollah launched 4,000 rockets. It caused 40 to 50 Israeli casualties, mostly military. But next time will be different. Civilians will be spared on neither side". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, March 2010. (According to the Israeli foreign ministry's website, 44 Israeli civilians and 119 IDF soldiers were killed between July and August 2006). [www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism+Obstacle+to+Peace/Terrorism+from+Lebanon+Hizbullah/Israel-Hizbullah+conflict+Victims+of+rocket+attacks+and+IDF+casualties+July-Aug+2006.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism+Obstacle+to+Peace/Terrorism+from+Lebanon+Hizbullah/Israel-Hizbullah+conflict+Victims+of+rocket+attacks+and+IDF+casualties+July-Aug+2006.htm).

A senior Hizbollah official made the point that even a relatively minor Israeli attack would prompt a strong reaction, regardless of the risks of escalation: "If Israel launches a strike on any target in Lebanon, we will not take it lightly. We would not consider it a routine act. Israel would have to face the consequences. It is up to them to think it over carefully".<sup>12</sup>

Much of this could be dismissed as bravado, threats intended to both boost militants' morale and deter any Israeli operation. Still, Nasrallah typically has sought to maintain his credibility by delivering on his promises,<sup>13</sup> and Israeli officials take the threats seriously, based on their belief that Hizbollah now possesses a system of long-range missiles that can reach far south. As one acknowledged, "in any coming confrontation, civilians will be vulnerable. I believe that Hizbollah will hit hard in this respect, whether from the outset or later on. In turn, Israelis will react by saying we must respond in kind and put pressure on both Lebanon and the Lebanese population".<sup>14</sup>

## B. ... AND A MORE EXTENSIVE ONE

Since the 1973 Syrian-Egyptian attack, Israel has not faced a serious, coordinated military effort by an alliance

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Israel also claims that some 3,970 Hizbollah rockets landed on its territory during that period, 901 of them in urban areas. See [www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism+Obstacle+to+Peace/Terrorism+from+Lebanon+Hizbullah/Hizbullah+attack+in+northern+Israel+and+Israels+response+12-Jul-2006.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism+Obstacle+to+Peace/Terrorism+from+Lebanon+Hizbullah/Hizbullah+attack+in+northern+Israel+and+Israels+response+12-Jul-2006.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Hizbollah had claimed well ahead of the 2006 kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers that triggered the ensuing war that it was seeking to do so as a means of negotiating a prisoner exchange. See [www.haaretz.com/news/8-soldiers-killed-2-snatched-in-hizbollah-border-attacks-1.192833](http://www.haaretz.com/news/8-soldiers-killed-2-snatched-in-hizbollah-border-attacks-1.192833); [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/middle\\_east/5171616.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/middle_east/5171616.stm); see also Crisis Group Middle East Report N°57, *Israel/Palestine/Lebanon: Climbing Out of the Abyss*, 25 July 2006, p. 10. After the July 2008 prisoner exchange, Nasrallah publicly announced that all relevant prisoners had been handed over and thus that the matter could be put to rest. *Al-Manar*, 16 July 2008. In 2010, the Hizbollah leader acknowledged that some might dismiss his claims as pure propaganda, but he added: "True, I speak and wage a psychological war, but this psychological war is based on facts, on true data. We do not practice a psychological war using lies, deception, and obscurantism, neither against the enemies nor against the friends.... The Israelis understand this". *Al-Manar*, 1 May 2010. Indeed, an Israeli official remarked: "Nasrallah's threats cannot be compared to, say, those made by groups in Sudan. Hizbollah has the capacity to reach very deep inside Israel". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010. That said, a former defence official was more sceptical: "His threats should be taken with a grain of salt. Remember, he is uttering them while hiding in a bunker. He is not as strong as he would like people to believe". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, May 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010.

of its enemies. Syria has used several organisations as proxies and has extended logistical and political support to Hizbollah and Hamas. But it has made a point of not joining them in combat, fearing a ruinous Israeli attack and lacking any effective self-defence capacity.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Iran can afford to adopt the most militant posture vis-à-vis Israel to a large extent because it does not share a border and thus faces less of a risk. Even so, and although the Revolutionary Guards are said to have directly participated in operations against Israelis on Lebanese soil (most recently in 2006)<sup>16</sup> – and while, from Israel's perspective, Iran already is present on its northern and southern borders, in Lebanon and Gaza<sup>17</sup> – Tehran has carefully shied from overt confrontation.

Syrian and Iranian influence notwithstanding, Hizbollah has sought to frame its struggle essentially in national terms, aware of the domestic political cost it would incur were it viewed as waging war on behalf of another. Despite speculation, there is, for example, no evidence that the Shiite group precipitated the 2006 confrontation to assist an embattled Hamas (which was being subjected to Israeli attacks in Gaza), lessen international pressure on the Syrian regime or divert attention from Iran's nuclear program.<sup>18</sup> During the December 2008-January 2009 Gaza war, Hizbollah refrained from any direct action against Israel from Lebanese soil, instead lambasting Cairo for its passivity. Only after Egypt accused it of setting up a cell on its territory to provide logistical and military help to Hamas, did Hizbollah acknowledge assisting the Palestinian organisation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°63, *Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, 10 April 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Avoiding Renewed Conflict*, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Israeli officials stress in particular Iran's alleged support for Hizbollah's military capability via weapons supplies, training and on-going intelligence cooperation. Crisis Group interviews, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, April-July 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Climbing Out of the Abyss*, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> In April 2009, Egypt detained 26 members of a purported Hizbollah cell accused of plotting to smuggle weapons into Gaza, attack Israeli tourist sites in Sinai and fire on ships crossing the Suez Canal. Nasrallah denied the existence of any such plan to conduct attacks from Egyptian soil, but added: "If aiding the Palestinians is a crime, then I am guilty and proud of it". See *The New York Times*, 14 April 2009. He also acknowledged that Sami Shehab, a member of the organisation arrested in Egypt, had provided "logistical work to help Palestinian brothers in transporting men and equipment for the resistance inside Palestine". *Al Manar* website, 10 April 2009. Earlier, Hizbollah's leader had called on the Egyptian people to stand against their government for its passive stance toward Hamas. On 28 April 2010, an Egyptian court convicted the 26 men of spying on behalf of Hizbollah and planning terrorist attacks. They were sentenced to prison terms ranging from six months to 25 years. See the *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 April 2010.



If past is prologue, one could assume that a future confrontation between Israel and Hizbollah likewise would be confined for the most part to a one-on-one battle and not directly or overtly implicate other members of the "axis of resistance". Still, from Israel as well as from the Shiite movement come suggestions that the next time could be different. While such warnings likely form part of a broader deterrence effort – threatening a far wider war in order to avoid it – they also reflect rapidly shifting regional dynamics.

### 1. Israel's expanding address list

Among the factors that have tended to geographically circumscribe confrontations has been Israel's decision to define South Lebanon as the agreed theatre of operations. The 2006 conflict provides clear illustration of these implicit rules, which had emerged during the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war. Israel struck Hizbollah strongholds in Beirut's suburbs and southern Lebanon, both of which experienced terrible destruction. In contrast, the IDF mounted only small-scale operations anywhere in the vicinity of the Syrian border and – albeit with some notable exceptions – Lebanese state institutions largely were spared.

There is good reason to believe such a scenario has become obsolete. Hizbollah retains a strong presence south of the Litani River – its traditional preserve – and, according to Israel, has stored vast quantities of weapons and fighters in southern Lebanon. However, the presence of over 10,000 UN and several thousand Lebanese troops hampers the movement's operations and manoeuvring room in that region. At the same time, Hizbollah has redeployed at least part of its assets to a second line of defence, notably in the eastern Bekaa Valley.<sup>20</sup> Should Israel decide to go after Hizbollah and seek to durably impair its military capacity, it almost certainly would need to extend the fight to that area, which Damascus traditionally has considered its strategic soft belly and which, in the early 1980s, it was ready to defend even at a high price.<sup>21</sup> Reflecting that rationale, a Hizbollah official speculated that in a future war, Israel would be compelled to conduct a major land offensive deep within Lebanese territory:

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<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°69, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, 10 October 2007. A Hizbollah official said, "the party would not leave any potential battlefield with Israel void of weapons. It is well prepared and has more than one solid defence frontline". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, July 2010.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed account of the confrontation in the 1980s as seen from Syria's perspective, see Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 376-383. However, an Israeli defence official argued that Syria's policy had since changed in fundamental ways: "Syria no longer is directly controlling Lebanon militarily. Its soldiers no longer are there. We do not expect it to behave as it did in 1982". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010.

War ultimately is inevitable. The Israeli army must rebuild its image of invincibility. It lost face in 2000, when it withdrew from South Lebanon, and then in 2006. They are preparing for the next round and realise the failure of the "revolutionary" approach developed in the West,<sup>22</sup> with its heavy reliance on advanced technology and air dominance. Next time, they will have to revert back to something more traditional, like the 1982 invasion of Lebanon [when Israeli troops reached the north of Beirut and the Bekaa]. We are preparing for that as well, and for more.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Hizbollah is more embedded in the Lebanese state than ever, greatly diminishing Israel's willingness to distinguish between the two. The Shiite movement is now fully integrated in the government and enjoys better relations with most of its former domestic foes.<sup>24</sup> As the relationship between the state and the militant organisation evolved from confrontation to accommodation over the past five years, Israeli officials made it increasingly clear that the central government would, as Defence Minister Ehud Barak put it, be held "accountable" for Hizbollah's acts.<sup>25</sup> In the words of an Israeli official:

The Lebanese are not making it easy for us to maintain the distinction between the state and Hizbollah. Indeed, it may no longer be analytically wise to do so. In the case of an escalation, and as a form of deter-

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<sup>22</sup> This is a reference to the "revolution in military affairs" which former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld saw as a template for U.S. military operations. See Donald Rumsfeld, "Transforming the Military", *Foreign Affairs*, vol.81, no.3, May/June 2002, pp. 20-32.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, January 2010.

<sup>24</sup> A Hizbollah official offered his assessment: "The changes within Lebanon have played out in favour of the resistance. Domestically, no one seriously challenges it anymore. Walid Jumblatt [head of the Progressive Socialist Party and a former harsh critic of Hizbollah and the Syrian regime] has made a U-turn; Prime Minister Hariri is displaying flexibility, and President Sleiman supports us. The influence of those who still oppose us – namely the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb – has become minor". Crisis Group interview, senior Hizbollah official, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>25</sup> See *Financial Times*, 25 May 2010. Following the Lebanese government's "ministerial declaration", which recognised "the right of Lebanon, through its people, Army and the Resistance, to liberate the Shebaa Farms, the Kfar Shuba Hills and the northern part of the village of Ghajar as well as to defend Lebanon and its territorial waters", [www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchivesDetails.aspx?ID=131426](http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchivesDetails.aspx?ID=131426), Barak announced that Israel would hold it responsible in the event of a "deterioration in the north". In such a case, "Lebanon will bear the responsibility among other things because it does not fulfil Resolution 1701 and other resolutions calling for the dismantlement of Hizbollah [and] Israel will see itself free to act". <http://news.nana10.co.il/Article/?ArticleID=655132&TypeID=1&sid=126>.

rence, Israel's doctrine is to hold the government of Lebanon itself responsible for any altercation caused by Hizbollah. We intend to place the entire burden of responsibility on the government's shoulders.<sup>26</sup>

In response to such threats, Lebanese officials and political leaders typically feel compelled to adopt an ever more defiant tone and to reassert solidarity with the Resistance – which, in turn, further intensifies Israel's exasperation.<sup>27</sup> An Israeli official said:

What is distressing today is that there are no voices inside Lebanon calling for moderation. Instead, the only government statements we hear are about backing the resistance. They need to be reminded what they have to lose by embracing Hizbollah's agenda.<sup>28</sup>

Further enhancing the risks of a broader conflagration, Israel is increasingly likely to extend a war across the Syrian border. There are several reasons. Syria provides an indispensable logistical platform for the Shiite movement, notably as a critical transit point for weapons transfers; UN Security Council Resolution 1701 notwithstanding,<sup>29</sup> the Lebanese-Syrian border is not being monitored effectively, and both Israeli and U.S. officials contend that a massive flow of ever more sophisticated weapons has been crossing it since the end of the 2006 war.<sup>30</sup> Recent allegations that Syria might have transferred SCUD missiles<sup>31</sup> to Hizbollah underscored that point.<sup>32</sup> Unless and

until Damascus gets the message that it will pay a price, Israeli officials argue, the arms shipments will continue.<sup>33</sup>

What is more, Syria has come to represent a more appealing target in the eyes of some Israelis. As a non-state actor, they argue, Hizbollah is exceedingly elusive and difficult to hit; as a weak and fragmented state actor, Lebanon finds it hard to take decisive action. In the words of an Israeli official, "Lebanon is like an amoeba – hard to handle or to grasp. In contrast, Syria hears us saying we will send it back to medieval times, replace Alawite rule, and so forth. They have reason to fear that we might conclude it is better to focus on them".<sup>34</sup> Another official echoed that view: "Some of us within the defence establishment argue that Syria should be held responsible. The regime is more vulnerable than Hizbollah and thus can be targeted more effectively".<sup>35</sup> Proponents of this approach still appear to be a minority within official circles, but deepening Syrian-Hizbollah cooperation has given their views added resonance.

So far, Israel has evinced little interest in toppling a Syrian regime that has maintained calm in the occupied Golan for nearly four decades and has long been considered preferable to a feared Islamist-dominated successor. That said, it does not exclude military strikes against weapons suspected of being transferred to Hizbollah, Syrian military installations, training centres or other regime symbols. Importantly, and based on past practice – most notably its September 2007 strike against an alleged nuclear facility to which Syria did not respond – Israeli officials have reason to believe that Damascus would absorb the punch and lick its wounds rather than risk a potentially catastrophic escalation.<sup>36</sup> Nor does it necessarily exclude a decision

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<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010.

<sup>27</sup> A government spokesman said, "now that Hizbollah is part of the Lebanese government, and they have been given official backing as if it were the official army of the Lebanese state, in such a situation any attack via Hizbollah against Israel or Israelis will be seen as an attack as well by Lebanon". Referring specifically to Prime Minister Hariri's warning, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said, "[Hariri is] simply a hostage of Hizbollah, which has veto power in his Cabinet". See [www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?ID=168304](http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?ID=168304).

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, May 2010.

<sup>29</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1701, adopted on 11 August 2006, defined the terms of a cessation of hostilities between Israel and Hizbollah and laid out a roadmap toward a formal ceasefire.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. and Israeli officials, Washington, Jerusalem, September 2009-June 2010.

<sup>31</sup> A SCUD is a Soviet-era surface-to-surface missile, originally designed to carry nuclear warheads and with a range of 300km. It later was modified to increase its range.

<sup>32</sup> As further discussed below, Israeli officials, starting with President Shimon Peres on 13 April 2010, alleged that Syria had transferred the SCUDs to Hizbollah. Although Israeli officials claimed the missiles had crossed the border into Lebanon, their U.S. counterparts were more circumspect, assessing that they remained on Syrian territory but that Hizbollah militants were being trained in their use. Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, Washington, April 2010; Crisis Group interview, U.S.

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officials, Washington, May 2010. Syria adamantly rejects the charge. Syrian Arab News Agency, 16 April 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, June 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010. According to an IDF consultant, "we agree that Syria has no interest in joining a war. And yet, Hizbollah's weapons are coming from Syria, and Israel can decide that Syria is the address. Assuming a conflict in which missiles are being smuggled to Hizbollah on trucks, that these trucks are still in Syria and that, operationally, we could strike them, what would we do?" Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, April 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>36</sup> On 5 October 2003, Israel struck a camp in Syria allegedly used for training Palestinian militants and, on 6 September 2007, Israeli warplanes destroyed a facility near al-Kibar later claimed by U.S. intelligence sources to be a nearly completed nuclear reactor secretly under construction since 2001. Bush administration officials said the U.S. opposed the strike, arguing that it would be best to first go to the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) but that, once Prime Minister Olmert had made his decision, Washington went along. Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, Washington, May 2010.

some time in the future that the regime is more of a liability than an asset.

An Israel official speculated:

Let's assume we blow up anti-aircraft missiles being transported from Syria to Lebanon. What if the Syrians react? We will unleash ferocious bombing. In fact, some people here can't wait for the opportunity. The Syrians might then choose to escalate, but it would be a big mistake. Those in Israel who are gearing for a confrontation would be only too happy to oblige, take the fight to the Syrian regime and break the axis of evil. They would want to get Assad on his knees.<sup>37</sup>

In 2006, already, Israel sent a clear signal by mounting a strike close to the Lebanese border-point of Masnaa where the bulk of weapons transfers were thought to take place. Some officials also claim that, in early 2010, Israel came close to attacking an alleged weapons convoy in Syria said to be transporting SCUDs across the border.<sup>38</sup>

## 2. From political axis to military alliance?

Even as some in Israel gradually have widened the circle of potential conflict, so too have its foes deepened the level of their security cooperation. Much reporting in this regard remains unsubstantiated and could not be independently verified by Crisis Group; these include claims of enhanced security ties and military cooperation be-

tween Syria, Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah. U.S. officials in particular have expressed alarm at what they describe as the unprecedented integration of Syria's, Hizbollah's and Iran's military systems – along with increased training, intelligence sharing and weapons transfers – suggesting that Syria might be dragged into a conflict involving Israel and Hizbollah.

Although none of the four parties acknowledges the existence of a formal alliance – one that would entail automatic military solidarity in the event of war – they increasingly present themselves as a front. By the same token, even as each asserts that it pursues separate interests and enjoys independent decision-making, they are sending signals that they might join forces in a coordinated military response. Reacting to perceived bellicose Israeli statements, Walid Muallem, Syria's foreign minister, warned that his country would retaliate against Israeli cities.<sup>39</sup> Soon thereafter, Damascus hosted a tripartite summit that brought President Bashar al-Assad together with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Nasrallah, in an ostensible display of solidarity at a time of mounting regional tensions.<sup>40</sup> Expressing what still remains a minority view among Israeli policy-makers, a defence official assessed that these were indications of a significant strategic shift:

Syria no longer is what it was in 1982. Today, I believe it is more probable than not that Syria would join in a confrontation between us and Hizbollah. We're already seeing intensifying intelligence cooperation, greater supply of weapons and the integration of weapon systems. In some situations, Damascus might allow rockets to be fired from Syria at Israel. And so we are preparing for such a scenario.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, Israeli diplomat, Jerusalem, April 2010. A U.S. official, while stating that the predominant Israeli view still held that it was best to maintain the current regime, suggested a contrary perspective was gaining ground – based chiefly on deepening ties between Syria, Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah. Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2010. A former Israeli defence official gave voice to that perspective: "In the event of war, Israel's strategic goal should be the overthrow of the Alawite regime in Syria, and with that aim in mind [it] should continue developing its mobile ground forces along with massive aerial firepower. Israel must prepare the international community for a war of this kind and will have to make it clear from the outset that we have no alternative. Israel will have to make the case that, because the enemy is protecting terrorists during a time of war, we have no choice but to hit the enemy's home front and infrastructure. Above all, Israel must make it clear right now that, in the event of a missile attack from the north, its goal will be the immediate overthrow of Syria's Alawite regime, even before it turns its attention to the missile threat. Such a statement could deter the Syrians from arming Hezbollah". Oded Tira in *Haaretz*, 25 April 2010.

<sup>38</sup> "We seriously considered intervening militarily to stop the shipment. We had passed messages to Bashar via the U.S., warning him not to transfer the weapons. But they did it anyway – and, in the end, we did not react. I am not sure it was the right decision, because it sends a message of weakness". Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, April 2010.

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<sup>39</sup> Responding to a statement by Israel's defence minister, Muallem said, "Israel shouldn't probe Syria's resolve, [because] it knows a war would extend to its cities". Syrian Arab News Agency, 3 February 2010, [www.sana.sy/ara/2/2010/02/04/270747.htm](http://www.sana.sy/ara/2/2010/02/04/270747.htm). Syrian officials apparently misconstrued Ehud Barak's statement as threatening when in fact he was reflecting on the futility of a war. Barak had said: "In the absence of an arrangement with Syria, we are liable to enter a belligerent clash with it that could reach the point of an all-out, regional war. Just like the familiar reality in the Middle East, we will immediately sit down after such a war and negotiate on the exact same issues which we have been discussing with [Syria] for the last fifteen years". *Haaretz*, 1 February 2010.

<sup>40</sup> See Agence France-Presse, 26 February 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010. A senior official offered a slightly more nuanced view: "I think that in the event of an Israeli-Hizbollah war, Syria and Iran will just wait and see. I hope they know the consequences of intervening. But we should not take that for granted. A scenario in which they choose to join is not probable. But it is now possible". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010.

From Syria's perspective, directly joining a confrontation with Israel would seem to make little sense and cut against decades of more prudent practice. As a frontline state, and in contrast to its allies, it would essentially be defenceless were Israel to launch an all-out assault against its territory. Iran is distant, has greater military assets and is unlikely to face more than an Israeli targeted strike against its nuclear facilities – costly perhaps, but presenting no real threat to regime survival. Although they could suffer severe blows, Hizbollah and Hamas have shown they could more easily hunker down and withstand even serious damage to their infrastructure. Of the four, Syria, by far, is the most exposed.

Damascus would be highly vulnerable to an Israeli land assault; although there are reports the regime is preparing for possible guerrilla warfare,<sup>42</sup> the fact that the area south of the capital is a flat and rather barren plain raises questions as to the model's applicability. Unlike Hizbollah, the Syrian regime might find it hard to survive a crushing blow to the country's infrastructure.<sup>43</sup> Public bluster notwithstanding, regime officials privately convey an unmistakable feeling of vulnerability.<sup>44</sup> Unsurprisingly, most Israeli officials interviewed by Crisis Group reached the conclusion that, because of this vulnerability and the im-

perative of regime survival, Damascus would opt to stay out of any future confrontation.<sup>45</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is highly likely that Syria's preferred option remains to watch from the sidelines while offering logistical, material and political support to Hizbollah. Still, there are signs of evolution in the regime's thinking which warrant an explanation. Syrian officials and observers alike question with growing frequency whether the regime, regardless of its preference, would be able to stay out of the action. Should the war provoke massive destruction in Lebanon, strong popular reactions throughout the Arab world, fighting in close proximity to the Syrian border or, worse, an Israeli strike on Syrian territory, pressure on Damascus to act inevitably would build. The regime's credibility – in the eyes of both its allies and broader public opinion – could be at stake.

More significantly, if – as some Israelis suggest – the goal of the war were to effectively eviscerate Hizbollah's military potential, Damascus would face a profound strategic threat before which it could hardly remain inactive; indeed, events in Lebanon since Rafic Hariri's assassination and Syria's military withdrawal have heightened the regime's reliance on Hizbollah. A durable weakening of the Shiite movement would thus jeopardise core Syrian interests.<sup>46</sup>

Three additional dynamics ought to be taken into account in seeking to understand Syria's evolving posture. First is a shift in military doctrine that began after 2000. Historically, Syria has adopted several approaches to its conflict with Israel. In the 1960s and 1970s, its operating principle was conventional warfare. In the 1980s, the goal was to leverage Soviet support in the – elusive – hope of attaining strategic parity with its adversary.<sup>47</sup> By the 1990s,

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<sup>42</sup> Describing Syria, the head of Israeli Military Intelligence, Amos Yadlin, said, "they are strengthening elements that characterise ... guerrilla organisations: camouflage, deception, antitank weapons and simple rockets. Armour is being converted into infantry, and air forces are being converted into surface-to-surface rockets and surface-to-surface missiles". Quoted in *Haaretz*, 15 May 2008. A senior Hizbollah official echoed that view: "Syria learned the lessons of the 2006 war. It has been introducing elements of our resistance strategy within its own military posture". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>43</sup> In Yadlin's words: "Syria has for many years possessed the ability to reach [Tel Aviv, air force bases and emergency depots of the reserve forces]. However, it is correct to say that the Syrians are now investing not a little in increasing the mass and in improving the accuracy of the missiles capable of hitting the Israeli rear. At the same time, the Syrian army understands that it is not Hizbollah. It understands that if it attacks the Israeli rear, as Hizbollah did, it will lose strategic assets – assets that differentiate a state like Syria from a sub-state organisation like Hizbollah". Quoted in *Haaretz*, 15 May 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Expressing a view shared by many within the elite, a prominent businessman enjoying close regime ties said, "we've always had short wars with Israel. This one could be long. Under the best of circumstances, the outcome would be that we fall further into Iran's lap; the Iranians essentially would take over here. The irony is that we've essentially been protecting Israel over the years, de facto, by restraining our allies. They are really dangerous; they aren't averse to a final showdown. But for Israel and for us, all-out confrontation would now mean massive destruction". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2010.

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<sup>45</sup> Reflecting this view, one official said, "our assumption is that Syria will not commit suicide for anyone. At the rhetorical level, Syrian officials express increased confidence and more and more confrontationally. But we believe our basic assumption remains valid". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010. A former official put it bluntly: "Assad is consistent – he doesn't take such risks". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>46</sup> As Syria confronted a powerful Lebanese and international coalition aimed at undercutting its influence and weakening the regime, Damascus increasingly came to view Hizbollah as a dependable partner willing and able to compensate for the end of its military presence. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°48, *Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, 5 December 2005; Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Recounting this phase, a Syrian defence official said, "for us, a turning point occurred in 1982, when then Defence Minister Ariel Sharon led his troops to Beirut. It was one thing to target Palestinians in the South; quite another to conquer the Lebanese capital. That is when Syria turned to the USSR in an effort

the regime relied heavily on non-state actors, principally Hizbollah, to wage a proxy war that simultaneously kept the pressure on Israel and circumscribed the conflict to South Lebanon, where it followed relatively predictable parameters.

Beginning in 2000, a series of events led Syria to reassess its strategy, both in terms of what it anticipated on Israel's part and how it planned to respond. New developments included the collapse of Israeli-Syrian peace talks; Israel's withdrawal from South Lebanon; Hariri's assassination; the more hostile U.S. policy under George W. Bush's administration; Syria's own military withdrawal from Lebanon and the 2006 war. From 2000 onwards, but most strikingly after 2006, Damascus is said to have vastly expanded its ballistic missile inventory, in effect acquiring the capacity to comprehensively threaten Israeli territory.<sup>48</sup> Acknowledging this trend, a senior Syrian security official described it as groundbreaking: "This is one of several taboos that had been established by [Bashar's father] Hafez which Bashar subsequently broke. In place of essentially symbolic RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] and Katyusha rockets, we have acquired a robust strike force".<sup>49</sup>

Secondly, Syria has become gradually more sceptical regarding both Israel's willingness to enter into meaningful peace talks and Washington's capacity (or desire) to

pressure it to do so. As a corollary, hope for a breakthrough in U.S.-Syrian relations has diminished just as fear of renewed confrontation with Israel has risen. In the context of a deteriorating regional climate, with little to hope for from the U.S., many Syrian officials are of the view that the regime must, at a minimum, continue to hedge its bets if not tighten ties to its allies as the only insurance policy it can realistically afford.<sup>50</sup> A senior official acknowledged that Syria had been bolstering its links to the militant axis, explaining:

Yes, we are strengthening our relations with our allies. It is a matter of simple logic: Whenever we see Israel moving toward greater extremism and aggression, we move more closely toward our friends. Besides, Israel is engaging in policies region-wide that provoke ever stronger popular reactions. We read these trends, and our policies are a function of them. You cannot appraise our approach in isolation.<sup>51</sup>

Another official echoed this feeling:

We are required to strengthen our deterrence in every possible way, even in ways we don't particularly like. We need peace, but in the meantime, we have to defend our interests. As the weaker side, what choice do we have but to fortify our alliances? Those are the only cards we have. Give us something else to work with, and you'll see what we do.<sup>52</sup>

Officials emphasise that their first and "strategic" choice remains peace, that their posture remains defensive and that they would willingly pursue alternatives to war.<sup>53</sup>

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to seriously bolster its own defences". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2010.

<sup>48</sup> There are numerous media reports to that effect. See, eg, Ron Bouso, "Syria Deploys Thousands of Rockets on Israel Border: Sources", *Agence France-Presse*, 9 March 2007; Ya'aqov Katz, "Israeli Officials Warn of 'Unprecedented Military Build-Up' by Syria", *The Jerusalem Post*, April 13, 2007. According to U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, "Syria and Iran are providing Hizbollah with rockets and missiles of ever-increasing capability. And we are at a point now ... [where] Hizbollah has far more rockets and missiles than most governments in the world". See [www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4616](http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4616); for a discussion of Syria's military capability, see "The Arab-Israeli Military Balance", Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), p. 49.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, March 2010. Yadlin, the head of Israel's Military Intelligence, said, "the Syrians still perceive themselves as militarily inferior in the face of Israel's air power, technological superiority and modern weapons systems. Accordingly, they are developing a capability for a different type of war. They are not strengthening themselves with planes and tanks, but with anti-aircraft missiles, antitank missiles, long-range rockets and long-range missiles. This trend has been continuing for many years, but is also based on the lessons drawn from what Syria views as Hizbollah's success in 2006". Quoted in *Haaretz*, 15 May 2008. Syria might view this as a means of "catching up" with both Hizbollah and Iran, two allies whose rising status in the region had left Syria relatively weak and thus excessively exposed to a potential Israeli attack.

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<sup>50</sup> In the words of a senior Syrian official, "the U.S. claimed to be exercising pressure on Israel, but in truth it did nothing of the sort. Israel proved it was capable of tying the hands of the U.S. president, who came out of this looking weak in Arab eyes. We drew one key lesson: we need to support the resistance, regardless of its standard-bearer, be it Hamas, Hizbollah or Islamic Jihad". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2010. A Hizbollah official said, "the U.S. decline in the region has narrowed the range of alternative that exist to the option of resistance. Those who pinned their hopes on the U.S. and Israel are losing faith, while forces of resistance are becoming stronger by the day". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, March 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2010.

<sup>53</sup> An official said, "we've never seen such a right-wing, aggressive government. Isn't it our natural right to strengthen our deterrence when Israel elects people like Netanyahu and Lieberman? Still, we remain committed to our general approach, and one should not lose sight of other dynamics. Turkey helps us balance things out. We are close friends with two Islamic powers, but one of them is a NATO member. When Iran talks tough, Hizbollah talks tough. But we can influence them and make sure things don't get out of hand. Hizbollah is a responsible organisation. It is engaging in psychological war, but is not

But, dubious about such prospects and concerned about a more comprehensive confrontation, Syria, Iran and Hizbollah appear to be planning ahead and – arguably more than at any time in the past – coordinating their actions. As noted, U.S. officials evoke the purported “integration” of their respective military systems with greater frequency.<sup>54</sup> Together with Israeli counterparts, they have put particular focus on the alleged transfer of SCUD missiles from Syria to Hizbollah. A U.S. official stated starkly:

The SCUDs transfer was just one more step and, from Syria’s perspective, one that did not even reflect a radical shift. Rather, it is part of a logical progression. This presents the very real risk that Syria is becoming enmeshed in a security system and structure from which it will become far more difficult practically and far more costly politically to extricate itself. This does not mean Syria has changed its strategy or turned its back on the prospect of a peace agreement. But it could involuntarily be drawn into a dangerous dynamic and ultimately dragged into a conflict because of the intensity of its security ties and because it will have no choice.<sup>55</sup>

Even as Damascus adamantly rejected the claim, several officials were unapologetic in describing Syrian efforts to strengthen Hizbollah<sup>56</sup> and pointed to the inconsistency of

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mounting a single operation, nor responding to any provocation. That says something about their posture”. Crisis Group interview, May 2010. For a broader discussion of Syria’s approach, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°92, *Reshuffling the Cards? (I): Syria’s Evolving Strategy*, 16 December 2009; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°93, *Reshuffling the Cards (II): Syria’s New Hand*, 16 December 2009.

<sup>54</sup> U.S. officials express particular concern about the possible transfer of missile guidance systems which could significantly improve their precision. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, January 2010. A knowledgeable U.S. official said, “the Syrians are doing things in terms of deepening their entanglement with Iran and Hizbollah that truly are mind-boggling. They are integrating their military/defence systems to unprecedented levels. Hafez al-Assad never would have gone so far and it is becoming hard to see how they can possibly extricate themselves”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, February 2010. A senior Syrian official curtly dismissed U.S. claims: “We ask for proof. They don’t have any. They simply are listening to what the Israelis say”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2010. An unidentified U.S. official also accused Damascus of installing an Iranian radar system on Syrian soil for the mutual benefit of all three allies. See Agence France-Presse, 3 July 2010. Again, Syria denied the allegation, stressing the lack of detail on the radar’s type, capabilities and location. *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 6 July 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, May 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Some expressed puzzlement as to why the U.S. was accusing Syria of delivering SCUDs – which, they claimed was both in-

focusing on this matter while ignoring the broader context. As a Syrian official put it, “you can raise the issue of weapons transfer to Hizbollah but only if you look at the question of weapons delivery in the Middle East as a whole. You can’t just cherry pick, selecting some issues over others”.<sup>57</sup>

Thirdly, as further described below, Syria and its allies appear to be shifting ever more toward a collective logic of deterrence. The goal, as stated by Syrian and Hizbollah officials, is to increase the potential costs of war to Israel by stockpiling ever greater quantities of ballistic missiles and other advanced weapons, while maintaining ambiguity and secrecy regarding the precise scope of these capabilities and their willingness to use them. In a Hizbollah official’s words, “acquiring more weapons establishes a balance of forces that contributes to stability. By contrast, a weak Lebanon, Syria or Hamas stimulates Israel’s appetite. It used to be easy for Israel to attack Lebanon, because it knew there would be no reaction. Today it is far less confident”.<sup>58</sup>

Of note, officials from the Shiite movement share the opinion that Syria – whether of its own volition or inexorably driven by the conflict’s inherent dynamics – could be drawn into the fight. As one put it:

This is the first time we hear a Syrian official assert that his country would be part of the war. Of course, this would need to be tested. But Syria is more confident now about its military capacities which it has developed since 2006. It also has learned lessons from the July [2006] war. In addition, by virtue of its alliances, it enjoys greater strategic coverage; they can benefit from Iran’s, Hezbollah’s and – to some extent – even Hamas’s military power. That does not mean Syria’s preference is war; it is not. But it means that whereas Syria is weak when isolated, within a system that encompasses Iran, Hizbollah and Hamas, it gains strength. Israel fears this resistance system. It does not fear each force on its own.<sup>59</sup>

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accurate and, given the missile’s size and cumbersome nature, militarily nonsensical because it would be ill-adapted to Hizbollah’s mobile tactics and too vulnerable to Israeli attack – when Syria in fact had delivered more effective and appropriate weapons systems. Crisis Group interviews, June 2010; see also below Section III.A.1.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interview, May 2010. He added: “It is the same pattern with UN resolutions. The U.S. wants to talk about UNSCR 1701? Fine. But then also mention Resolutions 242 and 338, which talk about the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force”.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, May 2010. A senior Hizbollah official added: “Syria has acquired a robust

A Syrian official said, "I don't believe we are close to war. But should war break out, it would be unlike what we've seen in the past. Syria would not be in a position to stick to the sidelines. It would intervene. We know we can't defeat Israel. But we will do as Hizbollah did, which is to inflict great pain".<sup>60</sup>

### 3. The looming question of Iran

Further clouding the regional landscape and hovering over it is the matter of Iran, which could play out in one of several ways. Israel could be tempted to try to neutralise Hizbollah's military arsenal (occasionally described as Iran's "second strike" capacity)<sup>61</sup> as a prelude to an attack against Iran's nuclear facilities.<sup>62</sup> In mirror image, some Israelis raise a concern that Tehran might press Hizbollah (which they often somewhat simplistically consider an Iranian proxy)<sup>63</sup> to attack in order to divert attention from its nuclear program,<sup>64</sup> reduce international pressure<sup>65</sup> or respond to an actual Israeli strike.<sup>66</sup>

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ballistic capacity of its own. It is now strong in its own right, and it also has friends and allies who are equally strong". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interview, March 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, May 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Opinions differ as to whether, in theory, optimal timing would be immediately or several months prior to a putative attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, April-July 2010.

<sup>63</sup> An official said, "Hizbollah does not stand on its own. It is armed and trained by Iran and Syria. The real address is Tehran". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010. A former official offered a more nuanced view of the division of roles: "We are facing a quartet comprising Iran, Syria, Hizbollah and Hamas. But like in any basketball team, each has a role. Iran is the point guard, the one that organises the offence. It delivers the ideology. Syria has a central position of coordination due to its geographic position. Hizbollah and Hamas perform – they score points". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>64</sup> In April 2010, an Israeli official argued that Tehran was deliberately raising tensions on Israel's northern border – in particular by transferring weapons to Hizbollah via Syria – as a diversionary tactic at a time of growing support for sanctions related to its nuclear program. "Much of this is being pushed by Iran, which wants to divert attention as pressure on it grows. They would not at all mind another conflict to take peoples' minds away from their nuclear program". Crisis Group interview, April 2010.

<sup>65</sup> An adviser to the Israeli government remarked: "Let's imagine an escalation of sanctions or even a partial sea blockade imposed on Iran. At that point, Iran will have an incentive to signal it can respond and exact a price. It could choose between blowing up a mall in Manhattan, a U.S. base in Iraq or Afghanistan, a U.S. ship in the Gulf. Or it could use Hizbollah to strike Haifa. I believe it will begin in Haifa. In the grand game of mutual signaling, Israel might well end up being the playing field. Iran does not fully control Hizbollah, but it exercises sub-

stantial influence over it". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

On both sides, the prevailing feeling seems to be that such a confrontation is not imminent. Israeli policy-makers believe Iran has little interest at this time in provoking an Israeli-Hizbollah conflict that could eliminate the Shiite movement as an effective deterrent to a future Israeli attack; instead, they think, Iran would act only if and when its own situation became far more precarious.<sup>67</sup> A former defence official said, "Hizbollah already has the ability to fire rockets deep inside Israel. But it does not wish to play this card prematurely. Under Tehran's guidance, they want to save this for the time we are at war with Iran".<sup>68</sup>

A war perceived in Lebanon and the region as serving primarily Tehran's purpose and coming at great human cost to the Lebanese could seriously jeopardise Hizbollah's domestic standing, including among its traditional constituency; further antagonise Arab regimes; and, perhaps most importantly from Iran's perspective, threaten the Shiite movement, arguably the Islamic Republic's most successful achievement in the Arab world as well as the key to its role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Even assuming Hizbollah merely plays to Iran's tune, Tehran likely would take this step only if faced with a genuine existential challenge.<sup>69</sup>

Likewise, there is reason to doubt that Israel is on the brink of striking Iran and, therefore, of planning to neutralise Hizbollah in anticipation: Washington has made clear it wishes to give the diplomatic track a chance and believes the recently-imposed sanctions – by the UN and, more importantly, by the U.S. and several of its allies – could significantly affect Iran's economy and thus its calculations. In a few months, officials anticipate, Tehran will

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stantial influence over it". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, May 2010.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, April-July 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, May 2010.

<sup>69</sup> A senior Lebanese defence official argued: "It would be difficult for Hizbollah to be plainly seen as responding to an Iranian order or looking after Iranian interests. Today, they are still widely perceived in Lebanon as a Lebanese resistance movement. Were that to change, things would become far more complicated for them. That said, were Iran to reach a desperate situation, this analysis might no longer apply". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010. In the wake of an Israeli strike on its nuclear facilities, Tehran could choose to respond differently, for instance by selecting narrower, less provocative targets for retaliation or acting in Iraq, Afghanistan or the Gulf. Asked about Hamas's potential reaction to an Israeli strike on Iran, a movement leader said: "The Iranians are telling us they have many, different, sophisticated ways of responding. Regardless of our own calculations, we don't think they would need us". Crisis Group interview, February 2010.

seek ways to return to the negotiating table.<sup>70</sup> By most accounts, Prime Minister Netanyahu would be loath to thwart U.S. objectives on an issue Obama unmistakably has defined as a core American interest. As one official put it:

Had you asked me a few months or even weeks ago, I would have expressed real worries. I feared a scenario in which no single party wanted a war, but their steps led them there against their will, that something could happen with Iran and thus with Hizbollah. Today, my concern has diminished. The degree of anxiety in Jerusalem about Iran has lessened somewhat. They remain extremely concerned and will look to indicators such as the pace of uranium enrichment, levels of enrichment, how many centrifuges are operating, existence of clandestine facilities or procurement of anti-aircraft defence systems. Many thought 2009 would be the critical year. Then they said 2010. I no longer believe it will be this year. But then again, we still have 2011 ...<sup>71</sup>

Still, the broader point remains, which is that the Iranian factor – viewed in Israel as the central national security challenge conditioning virtually all others – adds a further level of uncertainty to an already volatile situation and enhances the chances of a spiralling conflict. The perception in Israel that it faces a multi-layered threat whose various dimensions cannot be isolated from one another and which could evolve into a wider regional conflict was captured by a senior official: “If Hizbollah fires a single rocket, we will hold the Lebanese government fully responsible. Beyond that, we know that Lebanon is little more than a Syrian protectorate. And we also know that the real head is in Iran”.<sup>72</sup> Israel sees the conflict with Hizbollah within the context of its struggle with Iran, and policy toward Hizbollah largely is subordinated to this logic.<sup>73</sup>

In their own way, Hizbollah and its allies offer a mirror image, indicating they are preparing themselves for a war they claim not to want, arguing that the best response to Israeli threats is to continue building up their individual and collective deterrence and cautioning that regardless of Israel’s target, it no longer can dismiss the possibility of a fight on several fronts. A senior official in the movement said:

Given the current state of play, small events can assume wider proportions and rapidly become interconnected. An incident could drag everyone into confrontation regardless of each player’s individual calculations. The past is thus not necessarily a guide to the future. Old theories no longer are relevant to an increasingly complex environment. What is certain is that wherever a war begins, there is no longer a guarantee that is where it will stop. A spark in one place could light a fire in another. Lebanon, of course, will be susceptible to broader dynamics. In particular, I cannot imagine a scenario in which an attack on Iran doesn’t lead one way or another to a regional flare-up.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, June 2010. He made the point that within a few months, Iran would feel the impact on oil sector investments as well as on trade, due to sanctions affecting the banking and insurance sectors in particular.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, June 2010. Israeli expressions of relative satisfaction notwithstanding, one ought not to underestimate the potential for a divergence in views between the two countries in the longer term. Some members of the Israeli cabinet remain sceptical of Obama’s approach to Iran and fear the U.S. inexorably is moving toward a containment strategy – living with a bomb instead of eliminating it. Crisis Group interviews, Israeli official and government adviser, July 2010.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010.

<sup>73</sup> One official put it bluntly: “Full-scale war in the north ultimately is the only way to crush the axis of evil”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

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<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.



## II. PREVENTING CONFLICT: CAN DETERRENCE WORK?

The Israeli-Lebanese border is quieter today than at any time in recent decades. As a UN official put it, "there is lot of rhetoric, exchanges of threats between Hezbollah and Israel, but the situation on the ground between Lebanon and Israel is calm. Since the end of the war and adoption of Resolution 1701, there have been no civil or military casualties. This in itself is an amazing achievement".<sup>75</sup>

### A. "MUTUALLY ASSURED DESTRUCTION"?

The most effective inhibitor of a third Lebanon war arguably stems from mutual fear that the next conflict could be far more violent and extensive than the preceding two. Officials from both Israel and Hezbollah privately share the conviction that the ability to inflict widespread damage represents their most effective means of deterrence.

The unsatisfactory outcome of the 2006 war notwithstanding, Israeli policy-makers insist, not without reason, that it has had a powerful impact on Hezbollah's calculations; the movement, they surmise, would think twice before initiating any action that could lead to even greater destruction. Hezbollah's purported victory was, in this sense, pyrrhic – holding its ground yet unable to thwart the massive displacement of its traditional popular base and extensive damage to the country's infrastructure.<sup>76</sup> Notably, significant hostile activity from Lebanon in effect has been frozen for the first time in decades. To a large extent, Hezbollah has adopted a policy of restraint – renouncing its traditional "reminder attacks" (*'amaliyat tazkiriya*) in the Shebaa Farms area; refraining from responding to Israeli over-flights<sup>77</sup> or other violations of Lebanese sovereignty<sup>78</sup> as it used to; and reportedly act-

ing – in some instances at least – to prevent rocket attacks by other groups.<sup>79</sup> An Israeli defence official said:

The main reason for the calm that has prevailed in recent years is the trauma caused by the 2006 war and the deterrent effect we produced by playing the part of the so-called "neighbourhood thug". The concept underpinning our approach to Hezbollah's threat chiefly is based on deterrence – on the vow that we will inflict more damage than our enemy is willing to tolerate.<sup>80</sup>

Of critical importance to Hezbollah's calculation is how much its social and political base could endure. Although support in the South remains strong, it is not without contradictions. Many Shiites simultaneously appear to resent the movement's religious agenda, dislike its ties to Iran, endorse resistance as a defensive concept, understand Hezbollah's capabilities are a source of both security and potential conflict and praise the quality of services the movement ensures. Under normal circumstances, they tend to back Hezbollah by default, given the absence of an effective state. In times of war, they can be expected to close ranks behind the movement.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>76</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Hezbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, UNIFIL official, Beirut, January 2009. Prior to 2006, Hezbollah routinely fired anti-aircraft rounds not so much at Israeli jets themselves, but into Israel. See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°7, *Hezbollah: Rebel without a Cause?*, 30 July 2003, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> A Hezbollah official said, "we know how delicate the situation is and act accordingly. We ignore provocations, such as an Israeli tank crossing a few metres into Lebanon. In the past, Hezbollah would have responded strongly. Had the front half of a tank crossed into Lebanese territory, Hezbollah would have hit it. Today we face small provocations and violations but deal with them diplomatically, via UNIFIL". Crisis Group interview, Hezbollah official, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>79</sup> Israeli officials claim Hezbollah has been involved in – or at a minimum aware of – some rocket attacks since 2006 and have briefed the UN. Crisis Group interview, UN official, Jerusalem, May 2009. A senior Hezbollah official rejected the allegation: "We do not operate in this way, and the Israelis know this well. When we act, we announce our objectives loud and clear. These rockets were fired by organisations that have no link to Hezbollah. We no longer control every square metre of the South". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010. A UN official noted "evidence in at least one instance of Hezbollah preventing a group from taking such action". Crisis Group interview, New York, September 2009. Among several rocket launches from Southern Lebanon against Israel, two took place during the Gaza war and another in September 2009. Although suspicions typically turned to pro-Syrian Palestinian factions and jihadi groups, some observers have argued that, in a number of instances at least, it seems somewhat implausible that any such group could have taken action without Hezbollah's knowledge and implicit acquiescence. See *Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 January 2009.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, April 2010. A former official pointed to the 2006 war's success in discouraging any Hezbollah provocation: "In 2006 we implemented a price-tag policy – we made Hezbollah pay a high price for what they did. To an extent, it worked". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, Hezbollah-controlled Lebanese villages, June 2010. Despite some discontent among Shiites with the movement, it won the vast majority of seats in the South during the 2010 municipal elections. A Hezbollah opponent in Bint Jbeil said, "even when people are not happy with Hezbollah, they vote for it. And everybody in the South – including their opponents – would back them were war with Israel to break out". Crisis Group interview, Bint Jbeil, May 2010.

Hizbollah understands the contradictions, and its sensitivity was on display vividly in the immediate aftermath of the 2006 war, when southern Lebanon's predominantly Shiite population had been massively displaced, and several villages essentially were razed to the ground. The movement, aware of the relatively short shelf-life of the legitimacy acquired during the war and keen to prevent dissatisfaction or anger to grow, rushed to address its constituents' plight.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the population of the South, tired of years of conflict and instability, wishes to preserve the relative calm it has enjoyed since 2006.<sup>83</sup> The Shiite movement openly acknowledges this; one of its officials said, "we don't want a war, although we prepare for one. Our primary concern is the fate of civilians who have endured much already. Our fighters are ready; they are not".<sup>84</sup>

More broadly, a war resulting in widespread destruction would be hard to explain let alone justify to the Lebanese population as a whole, particularly if its most tangible outcome were Hizbollah's mere survival; it almost certainly would reawaken sectarian tensions that surfaced in 2006 and afterwards. In addition, after an intense domestic and international struggle focused in part around the status of its weapons,<sup>85</sup> Hizbollah has managed to reassert its position and currently enjoys a relatively safe and sustainable domestic situation. It is unlikely to want to risk such tangible gains in pursuit of far more uncertain ones.<sup>86</sup> Although some movement officials boldly assert that they are in a stronger position than in 2006 to confront

a war,<sup>87</sup> at the very least such an assessment is predicated on Hizbollah not being perceived as having provoked hostilities.

The deterrence argument articulated by Israel is echoed to a remarkable degree by the Lebanese movement, which increasingly points to its ability – and determination – to take a war deep inside Israel as the reason why the 2006 struggle has yet to be followed by round two. A senior Hizbollah official explained:

The guns were not yet dry from the 2006 conflict [before] Israel already was thinking of ways to weaken us and facilitate the next confrontation. We could hardly just sit and wait. We consolidated our defensive capabilities and acquired a real deterrent. This is why Israel is thinking long and hard before once again resorting to force. Were we not in possession of such a capacity, war would be far more probable.<sup>88</sup>

Officials from the movement suggest an evolution in its military outlook, with the current phase focused far more on deterrence. After a stage during which it conducted more traditional guerrilla operations designed to achieve Israel's withdrawal from the South, Hizbollah transitioned after 2000 to a policy combining relatively minor border skirmishes (which had only minimal impact on Israel and seemed designed above all to sustain a so-called culture of resistance at home) with intensive preparations ahead of a possible war.<sup>89</sup> The current phase carries this logic a step further, discarding largely ineffectual day-to-

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<sup>82</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Avoiding Renewed Conflict*, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

<sup>83</sup> According to a UNIFIL official, "the mood in the South is marked by concern at the possibility of renewed escalation. Memories of the 2006 war remain fresh. For instance, people strongly disapproved of rocket attacks against Israel that took place during the Gaza war. This was especially true after Hizbollah had denied all responsibility". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, January 2009.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, March 2010.

<sup>85</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, op. cit. Growing challenges to Hizbollah's armed status led the movement to cross a self-imposed red line, turning its weapons inwards and, in a show of force designed to deter any future such attempts, take over parts of Beirut. See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°23, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, 15 May 2008. Questions surrounding the legitimacy of Hizbollah's weapons arguably had deeper roots. After Israel's 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon, the movement began facing mounting calls for disarmament. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Rebel without a Cause?*, op. cit.

<sup>86</sup> A UNIFIL official commented: "Hizbollah has invested so much in order to establish its position domestically. Why would it jeopardise its efforts in a war whose outcome would be uncertain?" Crisis Group interview, Beirut, March 2010.

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<sup>87</sup> "If a war were to break out now, we would be in a stronger political position than in 2006. Already at the time, we enjoyed considerable popular support. Today, fewer still would wish to bet on our defeat". Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, March 2010.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010. Another official said, "Israel would have launched a war yesterday if they felt they could get away with it. The only reason they are holding back is that we have bolstered our capacity". Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, February 2010. Reflecting on Hizbollah's claims, an Israeli official remarked: "Hezbollah thinks that they have achieved deterrence against us. We see ourselves as the ones who have achieved that, through the 2006 war and operation Cast Lead. Israel regained its deterrence after a time when it seemed that we lost it, following our withdrawal from South Lebanon". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010. A senior official went further, expressing satisfaction at Hizbollah's posture: "The fact that Hezbollah claims it has established deterrence against us – even though it is not true – is positive. It is a form of face-saving message to their constituency that helps justify their lack of action against us". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010.

<sup>89</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Rebel without a Cause?*, op. cit., p. 8.

day clashes in favour of Hizbollah's deterrence capacity.<sup>90</sup> A Hizbollah official said:

Our position is clear and stated by Nasrallah – we are now focused on defence. That is very important. We have no interest in starting a confrontation. Yes, we have strengthened our positions. But the objective is to defend Lebanon and deter an attack.<sup>91</sup>

In the wake of the 2006 war, Israel invested heavily in several parallel efforts to defend itself against missile attacks: increasing its own deterrence, as seen, by demonstrating a willingness to inflict even greater damage; preventing the enemy from acquiring more weapons; upgrading shelters and civilian protection; and improving its ability to intercept rockets or hit launchers before they are fired.<sup>92</sup> This last dimension is considered critical. Progress in Israel's anti-missile technology, notably the so-called Iron Dome as well as David's Sling and Arrow systems, has been aimed specifically to counter short-, medium- and long-range rockets.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> There is an interesting similarity in Hamas's own evolution, which was noted by a Hizbollah official: "Hizbollah and Hamas have moved toward a defensive, rather than offensive posture vis-à-vis Israel. For our part, we shifted our position in 2006 by making clear our attachment to Resolution 1701 and that we did not want a war. Our focus now is on acquiring weaponry that will make any Israeli decision to resort to military force more difficult in the long term". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010. For his part, a senior Hamas official explained: "In Gaza, we are preparing for war. Every day we hear Israeli threats, and they are the reason why we are not firing rockets. Why would we shoot rockets while we prepare for something bigger? We need calm to prepare. Israel would like to go to war, but the decision cannot be taken easily, because Hamas now can hit back. There is no easy war for Israel anymore". Crisis Group interview, May 2010.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, February 2010. Hizbollah's new stance was enshrined in a revised political charter, released in December 2009, which replaced its 1985 Open Letter. According to the charter, "the Resistance ... has developed from a liberation power to a balance and confrontation one, to a defence and deterrence one". <http://english.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=9632&cid=214>. A Hizbollah official explained: "While reasserting the need for resistance, the party has ascribed new goals to it. The overall mission is the same, but its purposes have changed. Previously, our key objective was to liberate occupied land. Now we aim at establishing a balance of forces, becoming a power of deterrence and repelling any [Israeli] aggression". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2010.

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, Jerusalem, February 2010.

<sup>93</sup> Acknowledging that more work needed to be done, a defence official nonetheless claimed that "we are far better prepared than in 2006. The civilian rear is better protected and organised, giving our fighting force more time to end enemy fire and achieve victory". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010.

While these various elements could, over time, reduce Israeli fears of a Hizbollah attack, for now the movement appears convinced its strategy is working.

The Israelis are at an impasse. They want to isolate and weaken Hizbollah, whose weapons are a big concern to them. But for the first time, they cannot go to war. They have the military means, of course, but no longer can be sure of the consequences. Previously, only the Lebanese had reason to fear a war. Now both sides do.<sup>94</sup>

Referring specifically to Israel's anti-missile defence program, an official said, "Israel won't be able to break the current balance of power. They would be unable to deal with the intensity and amount of missiles our militants would launch. We would still be able to strike vital and strategic areas".<sup>95</sup> Another summed up: "As much as Israel wants war, it is afraid of a war whose outcome – or even the form it will take – it does not know".<sup>96</sup>

In this context, where the costs of confrontation potentially are so high, both Israeli and Hizbollah officials make the argument that war can break out only as a result of a clear strategic choice by one of the parties. At that point, any pretext – circumstantial or manufactured – could serve as a trigger. But in the absence of such a decision, chances of an unplanned, accidental war are slim in their view. A senior Hizbollah official put it as follows:

If Israel went to war as a result of a stray rocket, it would mean that it already had decided to wage it. War at this stage, under these circumstances, can only stem from a premeditated political decision. It is not

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On 19 July, Israel claimed to have successfully tested the Iron Dome system. *Haaretz*, 21 July 2010. A central preoccupation concerns the batteries' enormous price-tag, as some experts claim each missile could cost between \$40,000 and \$100,000 to intercept a homemade rocket that could cost around \$100. *Haaretz*, 22 July 2010. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to supporting Israel in this regard. "The United States continues to support the development of Israeli air and missile defence systems, including the Arrow Weapon System for long-range ballistic missile threats and David's Sling for short-range ballistic missiles .... The Obama Administration is committed to ensuring that Israel has all of the tools it needs to protect and defend itself". See [www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/04/141060.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/04/141060.htm).

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, March 2010.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, July 2010. He added: "The United States' policy of providing Israel with the most sophisticated weapons while they seek to hamper the capacities of the resistance is just another example of their biased policy. The U.S. and the West don't want to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. They want to favour Israel's hegemony over the region".

<sup>96</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, May 2010.

something you unwittingly slip into because of a rocket or any other incident. Israel already has all the pretexts it needs at its disposal: it constantly accuses us of stockpiling weapons. They could claim that any given truck was carrying a strategic weapon that would cross a threshold. But before they do that, they have to take a difficult decision.<sup>97</sup>

An Israeli government adviser developed a strikingly similar argument: "Hizbollah has made a strategic decision to maintain quiet. That is the reason – not Resolution 1701, nor UNIFIL<sup>98</sup> – why calm currently prevails. If that strategic decision were to change, then 1701 and UNIFIL would lose all relevance".<sup>99</sup>

As a result, and despite times of extreme tension fuelled by mutual accusations, during the first half of 2010 representatives of the various sides all but dismissed the possibility of an imminent conflict.<sup>100</sup> In their eyes, the necessary conditions – the prospect of a meaningful victory (made all the more important given the predictably high human costs);<sup>101</sup> unsustainable threat levels; and an appropriate regional context – do not exist at present.

Today, neither Israel nor Hizbollah can be sure it would achieve more than it did in 2006. Threat perceptions undeniably have heightened as Hizbollah's arsenal has grown, and Israel has hinted at possible action against the Lebanese movement or even Syria itself. But the ongoing, gradual nature of the changes underway makes it difficult to identify a clear red line or game changer. The regional climate, tense though it might be, comprises several countervailing elements. As seen, Hizbollah wishes to protect its position within Lebanon's new, fragile equilibrium; Syria has much to lose in all-out confrontation; even as-

suming Iran possesses the ability to push its frontline allies into war, the timing is wrong; and – unlike in 2006 – Israel might not enjoy unconditional U.S. (let alone wider international) backing,<sup>102</sup> while Prime Minister Netanyahu is intent on demonstrating his ability to preserve calm.<sup>103</sup>

Growing international condemnation of Israeli actions – as illustrated by the Goldstone report on the Gaza war and the recent flotilla incident, in which nine Turkish citizens were killed while seeking to break the Gaza blockade – arguably further constrains its ability to act.<sup>104</sup> In particular, the prospect of a predictably long and destructive confrontation, in an environment where international support could be more tenuous and short-lived than in the past, raises serious concern.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> War in the Levant would be a considerable setback for the U.S. at a time when it is seeking to unite the international community in opposition to Iran, restore its image in the Arab and Muslim worlds and move on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Reflecting on this, a Hizbollah official said, "The U.S. cannot underwrite a global war, though they could accept narrow strikes against Hamas or Hizbollah. That is one reason why we insist the next war would be a global one. This lowers the probability of it taking place". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010. He continued: "Israel doesn't have total U.S. support. U.S. priorities today are to defend its own interests, because it is present in the region and faces difficult problems in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2006, both Israel and the U.S. wanted a war and wanted it to last, and Israel enjoyed sustained U.S. diplomatic support and military supplies. Israel cannot carry out an unlimited war without unlimited U.S. backing".

<sup>103</sup> Some analysts note that, unlike many of his Israeli counterparts Netanyahu did not take Israel to war in his first or, up until now, second incarnation as prime minister. Crisis Group interview, U.S. and Israeli analysts, Washington, July 2010.

<sup>104</sup> A senior Israeli official described his view of the situation: "As a rule, the U.S. and the West do nothing to address our concerns and, when Israel finally acts to try to deal with the problem, they immediately convene in New York and call on all parties to 'exercise restraint'. They place the two sides on equal footing, as if one weren't a terrorist organisation and the other a democracy exercising self-defence". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010. Perhaps overstating the case, a former Israeli diplomat commented: "In light of its international situation, Israel will not open a war unless it has a very strong pretext. War for me is unthinkable without a truly significant provocation. I'd go as far as to say that there can only be a war in the short term if Hizbollah were to begin it". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>105</sup> In the words of a former Israeli diplomat, "clearing Lebanon of rockets would not be a matter of two or three days, and it would not involve operating in South Lebanon alone, since rockets can be fired from northern Lebanon and still reach Tel Aviv. Moreover, we once again would appear in the eyes of the world as the bully. We will be forced to stop the war, and it will end in some kind of tie". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv,

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<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>98</sup> UNIFIL stands for the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon, a peacekeeping operation deployed in the South in 1978 and significantly upgraded in 2006.

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Hizbollah, Lebanese and Syrian officials, Beirut and Damascus, May 2010; Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, May-June 2010. A senior Syrian official said, "Israel, led by its current government, would not have hesitated one second to launch another war against Lebanon, if it had a guarantee of success. But war is unlikely because of our efforts to deter them, because I assume the Americans don't want an open conflict for the time being and because Israel is in a tight spot internationally". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2010.

<sup>101</sup> A Lebanese analyst, remarked: "The movement has already set the strategic bar very high for itself .... Having pronounced as its new objective a 'decisive victory' with profound regional implications, Hizbollah will have to ensure that it achieves a strategic victory in its next battle with Israel". Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, "The Hizbollah Project: Last War, Next War", Open Democracy News, 14 August 2009.

Overall, commenting on this situation, a U.S. official said:

I think chances of a war in the short term are extremely low. Netanyahu is thinking politically, and the last thing he wants now is war. He wants to show he can ensure stability and security. Hizbollah wants to keep its powder dry. And Syria is militarily defenceless. Of course, there is a risk emanating from a third party – say a Palestinian group in a Lebanese camp firing a rocket. Even so, I think that in that event you would see a more mature Israeli reaction rather than a reflexive escalation.<sup>106</sup>

## **B. THE IMPACT OF SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 1701**

Resolution 1701 is best known for its limitations and for being honoured in the breach by all sides. It has neither prevented Hizbollah from what is said to be large-scale rearming nor put an end to Israeli violations of Lebanese sovereignty (whether through over-flights, occupation of small portions of territory, limited ground incursions or alleged intelligence-gathering activities). And yet, it has played an important part in preserving an unusual and welcome period of quiet. Its most important contribution has been the creation of a buffer between Israel and Hizbollah, whose proximity and direct contact had been a key source of instability in the past.<sup>107</sup>

At the heart of this containment mechanism was the overhaul of UNIFIL. Considerably expanded (from some 2,000 troops at the outbreak of the 2006 conflict to just under 12,000 today through unprecedented commitments by major European countries), it also was given a far more ambitious mandate – in essence, to bar any visible Hizbollah presence south of the Litani River.<sup>108</sup> Although this objective fell substantially short of Israel's demand that Hizbollah be forcefully disarmed (a goal that nonetheless is explicitly mentioned in 1701), it ensured that the militants "went from being lords of the land to thieves

in the night".<sup>109</sup> Israel expressed satisfaction with UNIFIL's new makeup, as it is now dominated by friendly European states, making it somewhat akin to a "NATO force wearing blue helmets".<sup>110</sup>

In the view of some officials and analysts, the force's composition – namely, participation by countries enjoying close ties to Israel – means that it restrains not only Hizbollah but Israel itself. This position was put forward by a senior Lebanese defence official: "Keep in mind that we have over 10,000 international troops in the South, and that, unlike in 1982, they are not from Nepal or Fiji. We're talking about Europeans. It makes it more difficult for Israel to conduct an attack".<sup>111</sup> An Israeli defence official concurred: "Sure, it limits our freedom of action. We don't want a confrontation with – say – Spanish forces".<sup>112</sup> This is not to say that UNIFIL's presence would be an insuperable barrier to war. The force possesses neither mandate, nor capability nor motivation to stand up to either party should one decide to attack.<sup>113</sup> Still, knowledge that a conflict could provoke a crisis with European troop contributors, prompt them to leave and thus preclude a return to the status quo ante likely acts as a further inhibitor.

UNIFIL has provided two other, more marginal benefits. The first is a liaison committee involving military officials from Israel, Lebanon and the UN; it is of limited scope, although it represents a rare forum for Israeli-Lebanese exchange, especially in the aftermath of small-scale inci-

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May 2010. A former official in the Bush administration said, "I don't believe there will be a confrontation involving Israel, Iran or Hizbollah this summer. Hizbollah represents a second strike capacity for Iran – why would it want to expend it now? As for Israel, the relationship with the U.S. is such that it would be highly risky to enter a war that could expand, last long and in which Jerusalem would not enjoy a shared sense of purpose with Washington". Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2010.

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2010.

<sup>107</sup> 1701 also has contributed to progress in other areas, notably a 2008 prisoner exchange and the delivery of maps detailing the areas where Israel had used cluster bombs.

<sup>108</sup> For details on 1701 and UNIFIL, see Crisis Group Report, *Avoiding Renewed Conflict*, op. cit.

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<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interview, former UN official, New York, July 2010. An Israeli defence official concurred: "UNIFIL's presence makes it much more difficult for Hizbollah to act there – they need to wear plain clothes, act in hiding and cannot carry visible weapons". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interview, former UN official, New York, July 2010. A former Israeli diplomat commented further: "This is an important precedent – intensive involvement of leading countries (France, Germany, etc.), within a large-scale operation, with high-quality equipment and high motivation". Crisis Group interview, Israeli defence official, Jerusalem, April 2010. Somewhat more critically, a former diplomat said, "UNIFIL II [ie, post-2006] is six or seven times larger than UNIFIL I, and it shows no particular hostility toward Israel, unlike its predecessor. It still is impotent. But at least it is not hostile". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, March 2010.

<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interview, Israeli defence official, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>113</sup> A senior Lebanese official remarked: "The Europeans in particular do not want to suffer major casualties and are careful to keep their public opinions on board. That means they can only stay as long as there is no war". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010. UN peacekeeping troops have suffered few casualties in recent years, focusing on "force protection" and shunning military engagement even when coming under hostile fire.

dents.<sup>114</sup> The second is a mechanism charged with clearly drawing a line between the two countries to limit the chances of involuntary or perceived territorial violations.<sup>115</sup> In both cases, the goal is to minimise the risk and facilitate the containment of possible incidents.

### III. POSSIBLE TRIGGERS OF CONFLICT

Ironically, the very factors that render war improbable at this time could turn out to be a catalyst of conflict in the future. The quantitative and qualitative improvement in Hizbollah's arsenal and deepening entanglement between it and Syria tend to prompt sharper Israeli threats which, in turn, induce members of the "axis of resistance" to intensify their war preparedness and military cooperation. In the short term, this vicious cycle might well discourage Israel from taking a decision to attack; in the longer term, it risks making such a decision appear increasingly inevitable. While Hizbollah is concerned about Israel launching an attack, and Israel is concerned about Hizbollah crossing a new military threshold, the steps each is taking to prevent those outcomes paradoxically are making them all the more likely – with all the more shattering implications. The more time elapses, the greater the build-up on all sides, the bigger the scale of an ultimate confrontation. An Israeli analyst and government adviser used an apt metaphor to describe this situation:

You have two kinds of equilibriums. The stable kind resembles a marble at the bottom of a hemisphere. It has no reason to start rolling. The other is where the marble rests atop a hemisphere. It's not moving yet, but it won't take much, and [then] nothing will stop it from gathering speed. That's the kind of equilibrium we have today.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> On the tripartite military committee, see the interview of the outgoing UNIFIL commander, Italian General Claudio Graziano. *Yedioth Ahronoth*, 2 February 2010. Meetings initially were held to coordinate Israel's withdrawal and facilitate the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) deployment. Subsequently, their purpose broadened to include identifying and addressing security and military operational issues, such as violations of 1701. Among questions discussed have been breaches of the cessation of hostilities, cross-border incidents, Israeli allegations of Hizbollah military activity, marking the Blue Line (the UN-demarcated border between Israel and Lebanon) and Israel's occupation of Ghajar. Israel also handed over cluster munitions data. Crisis Group interview, UNIFIL official, Beirut, July 2010. As described in the Thirteenth Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council resolution 1701 (2006), "Tripartite meetings, attended by senior representatives of the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Israel Defence Forces and chaired by the [UNIFIL] Commander remained a critical mechanism for regular liaison and coordination between UNIFIL and the parties, as well as building confidence between the parties", <http://daccess-ddds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N10/434/81/PDF/N1043481.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, New York, May 2010. UNIFIL is working with Israel and Lebanon to precisely mark the Blue Line over an area of roughly 40km. Once an area has been demined, Lebanon and Israel agree to the placement of blue barrels that are intended to visibly show the line. Crisis Group interview, UNIFIL official, Beirut, July 2010.

#### A. STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF INSTABILITY

##### 1. Can Israel sit and watch?

In a recent study, former U.S. Ambassador Daniel Kurtzer summed up reasons why Israel might go to war against Hizbollah over the next twelve to eighteen months:

Hizbollah has probably already breached the limits of what Israel considers acceptable behavior. The sheer number and enhanced quality of rockets Hizbollah has acquired in the past few years worry Israeli defence and homeland security planners, as does the effort by Hizbollah to acquire longer-range and more accurate surface-to-surface missiles . . . . Another Israeli "redline" is Hizbollah's acquisition of advanced surface-to-air missiles, such as the S-300, which would reduce Israel's air superiority over Lebanon . . . . The combination of these three factors – the size and quality of Hizbollah's missile inventory; the possible acquisition of long-range, accurate missiles; and the possible upgrading of Hizbollah's surface-to-air missile capability – changes the

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<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, April 2010.

equilibrium on the ground to an extent that Israel views as threatening.<sup>117</sup>

In other terms, Israeli threat perceptions focus on a scenario whereby Hizbollah would acquire high-grade ballistic and anti-aircraft missiles that could affect the current balance of power. A former senior Israeli official put it as follows:

In 2006 we underestimated the risk of Hizbollah deploying the [Iranian-made cruise missile] C-802; as a result it was able to strike [the Israeli warship] Hanit. Today, there is another crucial redline: surface-to-air missiles. SAMs would limit our freedom of action in Lebanese airspace. If I were defence minister and were provided with satellite photos of SAM batteries in Lebanon, I would order their immediate destruction.<sup>118</sup>

Such concerns are significantly enhanced when placed within the broader regional – ie, Iranian – context. An official commented: “In the short term, things might look good with Lebanon. But the long term is a very different story. Israel feels as if Iran is on its northern border. This translates into a very combustible status-quo”.<sup>119</sup> This reality has not escaped Hizbollah officials, one of whom remarked:

Our purpose has been to write off the notion of a preventive war, whereby Israel would destroy the threat we pose and not suffer the consequences. Of course, the new paradigm of “mutually assured destruction” adds to the uncertainty. It could deter Israel from attacking, for fear of the fallout. Or it could prompt it to do so, out of concern that Hizbollah’s capabilities might rise even further.<sup>120</sup>

To date, Israel’s response has been to intensify the development of an effective anti-missile system, step up its rhetoric and, in all probability, increase its effort to monitor if not disrupt Hizbollah’s procurement operations. To an extent, the approach is aimed at putting down a marker

and signalling that Israel is watching Syria’s and Hizbollah’s actions very closely. Two recent developments illustrate this dynamic.

The first concerns Israeli (and U.S.) allegations that Syria transferred SCUD missiles to Hizbollah. Questions about their accuracy aside,<sup>121</sup> Israel’s public accusations were meant to put the spotlight on Syria and loudly caution it against crossing any new threshold.<sup>122</sup> Militarily, it was hard to argue that the missiles per se alter the balance, particularly given the size and vulnerability of such rockets, which are known to be relatively easy to detect and destroy.<sup>123</sup> Rather, their significance arguably is more symbolic. SCUDs chiefly are remembered for having been indiscriminately fired by Iraq into Israel during the 1991 Gulf War, causing considerable trauma among Israelis.<sup>124</sup> In that sense, they have a special resonance in Israel and the U.S. – indeed, far more than missiles of superior lethality which Israeli and U.S. officials also ac-

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<sup>121</sup> As noted above, the claims were strongly denied by Damascus. European officials at least initially remained unsure, saying that the promised U.S. intelligence had not been shared. Crisis Group interviews, Washington, Paris, Beirut, Jerusalem, June 2010. At the same time, U.S. officials and members of Congress, including some who initially voiced considerable scepticism, claim to have been persuaded by intelligence briefings. Crisis Group interviews, Washington, May-June 2010.

<sup>122</sup> Insofar as Washington appeared not to believe that the missiles had crossed into Lebanese territory – as opposed to Hizbollah militants being trained in their use in Syria – part of the message seemingly was to warn Damascus against taking the extra step of transferring them across the border. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, June 2010.

<sup>123</sup> A Western intelligence official expressed broadly shared scepticism regarding the SCUDs’ effectiveness in this context: “These rockets are about twelve metres long and are launched from massive trucks. First, the truck must be elevated and stabilised on huge metal arms, to get it into an exact horizontal position and to relieve pressure on the wheels. When the missile has been fired, it takes over ten minutes to lower the truck again before it can move. Consequently, every time a SCUD is fired against Israel, the entire launching truck will be destroyed. It is a weapon you can only use once. Moreover, as the trucks are massive, they can be detected even before an attack”. Crisis Group interview, April 2010. A Syrian official said, “this whole affair is nonsense. Why would we send SCUDs? They take 30 minutes to set up, they are cumbersome and easily targeted. They are wholly alien to Hizbollah’s military strategy, which is based on quickness and flexibility. We have provided them with weapons that are far more effective. I simply cannot understand why they raise this”. Crisis Group interview, May 2010.

<sup>124</sup> An Israeli official argued that the threat posed by a SCUD was of a different nature than other missiles. Because they are both imprecise and long-range, he said, they were tantamount to “weapons of terror”, representing the threat of a strike against a major city causing considerable damage. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010.

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<sup>117</sup> Daniel Kurtzer, “A Third Lebanon War”, Contingency Planning Memorandum no.8, Council on Foreign Relations, p. 2 (July, 2010). He added: “Israel views Hezbollah’s acquisition of Scud missiles (some varieties of which could reach Israeli targets from as far away as northern Lebanon) or the Syrian M-600 rockets (which can carry a 500-pound warhead a distance of 155 miles with an advanced guidance system) as a strategic threat”.

<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, May 2010.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, May 2010. Another Israeli official said, “the key factor for most Israeli decision makers as they shape policy towards the Lebanese arena is that Iran is watching. The next Lebanon War is to be understood as the second round of a broader Israeli-Iranian one”. Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, July 2010.

<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, March 2010.

cuse Damascus of smuggling into Lebanon.<sup>125</sup> An Israeli defence official suggested part of his country's rationale had been to delineate and enforce a notional red line more than address a specific threat:

Israel wanted to clarify to Hizbollah, Syria and others that they were crossing a red line. Israel cannot accept that Hizbollah has rockets with such a long range; these can reach [Israel's presumed nuclear base in] Dimona. It does not matter if they are more clumsy and difficult to operate and likely to be taken down by Israel before they are even used. Now that they are on notice as a result of Israel's response, I believe Hizbollah and Syria will behave differently in the future.<sup>126</sup>

Secondly, in July 2010, as Netanyahu was meeting with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Israel declassified extensive data regarding Hizbollah's alleged presence and activities in the zone of deployment of UN peacekeepers in southern Lebanon.<sup>127</sup> The move was said to have aimed at warning the militant group that it had detailed information about its operations, thereby both pressuring it and, perhaps, building a case for a possible future military strike.<sup>128</sup>

Whether these responses will have a notable impact on how Hizbollah or Syria act is debatable. In the wake of the SCUD incident, U.S. officials presented a mixed pic-

ture. The Syrian president, they believed, had "gotten the message. He never acknowledged any transfer, but he understood what we were saying". Although Damascus has not stopped supplying weapons, let alone "reversed its actions toward Hizbollah, it ha[s] not accelerated its transfers either".<sup>129</sup> On the whole, however, neither Damascus nor Hizbollah appear disposed to accept the kinds of constraints Israel is seeking to impose, which, in their view, would project an image of weakness and thereby erode their own deterrence. Indeed, this appears all the more unlikely as they witness Israel's own preparations – development of its U.S.-sponsored anti-missile systems in particular – to counter the missile threat.

## 2. The limits of 1701

Its benefits notwithstanding, the framework established by Resolution 1701 has generated frustration. Despite early hopes, it has yet to resolve the complex issue of Ghajar, an isolated village of some 2,500 people strategically located on the slopes of the Golan Heights, where the Lebanese, Syrian and Israeli borders meet, whose northern part is clearly Lebanese yet still under Israeli control.<sup>130</sup> Other, arguably more critical issues have not even begun to be addressed. These include the status of the Israeli-occupied Shebaa Farms,<sup>131</sup> demarcating the Syrian/Lebanese border, ending all violations of Lebanese sovereignty and disarming "all armed groups". A UN official conceded: "On these issues we see very little progress and virtually no diplomatic efforts from the international community".<sup>132</sup>

From the outset, Israel has focused on UNIFIL's unwillingness to either confiscate Hizbollah weapons in the South or do more to seal the border with Syria.<sup>133</sup> In late 2006, a German-led initiative to bolster Lebanese border-

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<sup>125</sup> These include in particular the M600, a Syrian variant of the Iranian F110, which has a range of 250-300km and carries a half-ton warhead. If fired from southern Lebanon it would be capable of hitting Tel Aviv. [www.haaretz.com/news/syria-gave-advanced-m-600-missiles-to-hezbollah-defense-officials-claim-1.288356](http://www.haaretz.com/news/syria-gave-advanced-m-600-missiles-to-hezbollah-defense-officials-claim-1.288356).

<sup>126</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010. Another Israeli official said, "the SCUDs are not a major concern if taken on their own. So much other sophisticated weaponry is being transferred. They have an emotional significance because of the Gulf War, but they are not the biggest threat". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, May 2010.

<sup>127</sup> See, eg, *The Jerusalem Post* and *Haaretz*, 7 July 2010.

<sup>128</sup> An Israeli official explained: "Our purpose was to show the world how deeply they have entrenched themselves within the civilian population. Look carefully at the maps – the houses in which they store arms are right next to public buildings. In the past, we have seen that civilians are likely to move into such buildings. Our information shows that Hizbollah does this intentionally. The maps also show Hizbollah is comprehensively spread out. How can Israel avoid hitting civilians when Hizbollah is all over? Hizbollah's military presence in civilian villages is a threat to Lebanon's civilian population". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010. A defence official added: "All of South Lebanon is saturated with Hizbollah. Our information was a means of focusing on one specific place in order to provide a fuller picture. When weapons are available right next to the border, then every small event can spark an escalation". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, July 2010.

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<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, June 2010.

<sup>130</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of this highly convoluted situation, see Crisis Group Report, *Avoiding Renewed Conflict*, op. cit., pp. 18-19. We wrote in November 2006: "An odd situation has ensued, in which residents considering themselves Syrian, hold Israeli citizenship while living on what is – at least in the northern two thirds – officially Lebanese territory .... Israeli officials indicate a solution to Ghajar is at hand, under which UNIFIL II and the LAF [Lebanese Armed Forces] would assume control of the north", *ibid*, p. 18. To date, despite intense discussions, no agreement has been reached.

<sup>131</sup> On the Shebaa Farms, see *ibid*, pp. 17-20. Shebaa is part of the Golan Heights, captured by Israel in 1967. Whether it was originally Lebanese or Syrian is in dispute and at the core of today's argument; it therefore also is tied to the question of demarcating the Syrian/Lebanese border.

<sup>132</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, June-July 2010.



control capabilities was set in motion, with a pilot-project in the northern, least problematic area of the Lebanese-Syrian border. The UN Security Council, "presumably at Israel's urging" in the words of a well-informed observer,<sup>134</sup> also dispatched two groups of experts (the Lebanon Independent Border Assessment Team, dubbed LIBAT 1 in 2007 and LIBAT 2 in 2008) to assess Lebanon's needs and make recommendations toward an integrated border-control strategy. However, neither of these ongoing efforts<sup>135</sup> has yielded much.

Explanations for this failure are numerous and include weak coordination among the parties involved, but the core reason was provided by a UN official: "Effective border control requires three components: Syrian cooperation, Lebanese goodwill and proper technical aspects. These projects never had any bearing on anything other than that third dimension. But the problem is political more than it is technical".<sup>136</sup>

Critics also point to the Lebanese army's disengagement from the south and to reports of its cooperation with Hizbollah as further evidence of the movement's strengthened position and ability to operate more freely.<sup>137</sup> As frustration has grown, pressure has mounted on UNIFIL to take firmer measures to control Hizbollah and limit its armed presence in the South. France has taken the lead, adopting a more aggressive approach by actively searching for weapons,<sup>138</sup> to both inhibit Hizbollah and reassure

Israel.<sup>139</sup> This stance has triggered several recent incidents between principally French troops and local residents widely believed to be taking their cue from Hizbollah. Demonstrations and attacks by unarmed civilians – who threw stones at UNIFIL soldiers, grabbed their weapons and blocked their route – are seen as thinly veiled attempts to remind the peacekeeping force of boundaries it should not cross.<sup>140</sup> Explaining his movement's position, a senior Hizbollah official said:

We took a decision to cooperate with UNIFIL. They have made a few errors [by crossing Hizbollah-defined limits] and therefore met with a few reprimands. But their behaviour remains broadly acceptable. Israel would like them to do more, for instance to search private

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feeling is that UNIFIL is taking excessive safety precautions at the cost of its effectiveness. We think that the force should be more intrusive and try to hinder the ability of Hizbollah and other armed elements to function in the South". Crisis Group interview, May 2010. Among troop contributors, France appears relatively isolated on this issue. See, for instance, <http://blog.lefigaro.fr/malbrunot/2010/07/les-capitales-europeennes-divi.html>.

<sup>139</sup> A French official sought to justify his country's policy: "Without France, UNIFIL would be going round in circles and would lose credibility doing so. Our own credibility in Israel's eyes, our push for a more robust UNIFIL mandate, helps restrain any Israeli belligerence". Crisis Group interview, May 2010.

<sup>140</sup> Hizbollah officials allege that residents were upset because French UNIFIL troops took pictures of private homes, searched private properties and used sniffer dogs. One official said, "there are widespread feelings in the South that some UNIFIL troops are cooperating with Israel and that some raids were conducted based on Israeli information". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, July 2010. According to UNIFIL, they carried out their usual activities (patrols and checkpoints) albeit on a larger scale. They claimed that cameras, global positioning systems and dogs were not used, that vehicles stayed on main roads and that they did not enter private homes. They also claimed that some troops either got lost or were stuck in some villages where angry residents threw stones and blocked roads, damaging several UNIFIL vehicles and slightly injuring some soldiers. Crisis Group interview, UNIFIL official, Beirut, July 2010. Over the past several weeks, incidents in which Southern villagers took action against peacekeepers also have included following troops and recording their movements, blocking patrols and stealing UN equipment such as laptop computers. Crisis Group interview, UN official, New York, July 2010. These were neither the first nor most serious incidents in which Hizbollah and UNIFIL have struggled over the rules of the game. In June 2007, a car-bomb attack targeted a Spanish unit which had adopted a relatively aggressive posture. See Andrew Exum and Gerri Pozez, "United Nations Peacekeepers in Southern Lebanon: One Year After the War", Washington Institute Policy Watch #1272, 16 August 2007. And in August 2008, a Lebanese army helicopter was shot down as it entered a Hizbollah-controlled zone north of the Litani River. Some observers read these incidents as attempts by Hizbollah to signal what it would not accept. Crisis Group interview, UN official, May 2010.

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<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, May 2010.

<sup>135</sup> In November 2009, donors (notably the U.S., the European Union (EU), Germany, the UK and Denmark) jointly asked Lebanon to draw up a global strategy as evidence of its government's commitment. Prime Minister Saad Hariri agreed in February 2010, putting Minister of State Jean Oghasapian in charge. A technical committee, presided over by Oghasapian, presented a report to the prime minister on how to monitor the Syrian/Lebanese border, control the crossings and ensure socio-economic development of border regions. The report is due to be submitted for approval to the government and then discussed with Syrian officials. Crisis Group interview, Jean Oghasapian, Beirut, 26 July 2010.

<sup>136</sup> Crisis Group interview, May 2010.

<sup>137</sup> A UN official claimed that the number of LAF troops – which constantly fluctuates – was currently less than 5,000 – this despite the fact that Resolution 1701 referred to a decision by the government to deploy 15,000 in August 2006. Crisis Group interview, July 2010. According to a French diplomat, "there is considerable dissatisfaction with the LAF. They cooperate with UNIFIL but also cover up for Hizbollah. By our count, there are only 3,000 army soldiers in the South, and most just sit at checkpoints". Crisis Group interview, May 2010. On 8 July, the Lebanese cabinet announced it would increase the number of LAF troops in the South.

<sup>138</sup> A French official said: "Paris believes UNIFIL ought to adopt a stronger posture and exert pressure wherever possible to deal with the issue of weapons in the South. The general

houses or deploy along the Syrian border. But their mission is not to impose a blockade. We wouldn't tolerate it and would take a very firm position.<sup>141</sup>

The recent declassification of Israeli information purporting to illustrate Hizbollah's activities in UNIFIL's area of operation can be read as an attempt to produce the opposite effect – by signalling impatience, to shame the peacekeepers into more decisive action.<sup>142</sup> Ultimately, the outcome of this tug-of-war likely will be for UNIFIL actions to remain within tolerable boundaries for Hizbollah, given the troop contributors' general reluctance to expose their soldiers to more serious retaliation<sup>143</sup> – much to Israel's dissatisfaction and further contributing to the situation's inherent instability. Indeed, in mid-July 2010 the commander of UNIFIL forces issued an open letter to the Lebanese people, in which he sought to provide reassurance. UNIFIL also agreed to refrain from some of its more aggressive actions, for example by no longer taking pictures unless absolutely necessary and limiting use of tracked as opposed to wheeled combat vehicles.<sup>144</sup> An Israeli official explained:

If there is no decisive implementation of UNSC 1701 – and chances of this happening are very low – then we face two basic possible scenarios: either a conflict which could expand regionally; or increased Iranian/Shiite presence and influence in Lebanon. This is something that neither Israel nor many in the Arab world wish to see.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>142</sup> The declassified information included maps purporting to show arms caches in some 160 villages in southern Lebanon. In particular, one map allegedly demonstrated that "Hizbollah stores their weapons near schools, hospitals and residential buildings in the village of al-Khiam. Al-Khiam is only a model – that is a much broader phenomenon which exists in many villages in South Lebanon". Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, Jerusalem, July 2010. For full details, see <http://idfspokesperson.com/2010/07/08/intelligence-maps-how-hizbollah-uses-lebanese-villages-as-military-obsaes-7-july-2010/>.

<sup>143</sup> A UN official remarked: "if UNIFIL were given a Chapter Seven mandate to confront Hizbollah, then no Europeans would have contributed forces". Crisis Group interview, New York, May 2010.

<sup>144</sup> See *Daily Star*, 9 July 2010. In his letter, Major-General Cuevas assured the "people of South Lebanon" that UNIFIL personnel "have received strict orders ... [to show] full respect for private property; full respect for the privacy of daily life in the streets of the villages; full respect for the desire of the population not to be photographed. Our soldiers have received clear orders not to take pictures unless absolutely necessary for operational reasons; clear orders not to use tracked combat vehicles where there is possibility of damage to public or private infrastructure ...". See <http://unifil.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1499&ctl=Details&mid=3103&ItemID=9575>.

<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010. Frustration is palpable in Israel. "Western countries are doing nothing. Hiz-

UNIFIL has its own worries. An official insisted the current stalemate placed the peacekeepers in a precarious position, making it more difficult to justify or calibrate their mission, and stressed the need for a broader political solution:

UNIFIL has stretched its mandate to the maximum. UNIFIL on its own can't do more. Now is the time to move on the political front. It may not be realistic. But if there is no progress on the diplomatic level, it will be difficult to sustain our efforts. If outstanding issues are not addressed, the situation could very well deteriorate.<sup>146</sup>

### 3. The absence of a containment mechanism

A third and final structural element of instability is the lack of a serious mechanism aimed at minimising risks of escalation by establishing lines of communication, explicit or implicit rules of the game and clear red lines. Rather, as plainly illustrated by the SCUDs affair, even the definition of what one side perceives as critical thresholds is constantly being tested.<sup>147</sup> Both Israel and Hizbollah reject the idea of direct interaction; Lebanese leaders are loath to engage their Israeli counterparts for fear of provoking a political backlash at home and stoking fears in Damascus that they are pursuing a separate peace; and, until now, the U.S. has not focused on mediating between Syria and Israel on such issues, instead apparently concentrating its efforts on pressuring Damascus to keep Hizbollah's armament in check.

UNSCOL, the UN's political arm in Lebanon, has contacts with all local players and, in that respect, fills an important outreach function. But it lacks the mandate and status to deal with broader political issues and, as discussed below, suffers – as do other UN missions in the region – from the proliferation of competing UN offices without clear and coordinated policy direction from the top. Although UNIFIL appears to have developed creative ways of communicating with the Shiite movement, notably via the Lebanese army and local officials who also are Hizbollah members, its mandate is circumscribed,

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bollah continues to bring in long-range rockets and missiles. To the extent the West is pushing forward 1701 implementation in any manner, it is limited to preventing Hizbollah from having 52,000 instead of 45,000. This is ludicrous". Crisis Group interview, Israeli official, Jerusalem, July 2010.

<sup>146</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>147</sup> A U.S. official commented: "I can see that, from Assad's perspective, there were no red lines, and missiles were just one more on a spectrum, not a qualitative shift. Israel never clarified its red lines, and the fact is it did not take action against the SCUDs. By the same token, one could conclude there are few constraints on Israeli actions, as evidenced by its various attacks on Syrian soil". Crisis Group interview, Washington, May 2010.

and it cannot truly deal with broader political issues. The tripartite committee comprising UNIFIL and the Israeli and Lebanese military likewise is of only partial value, since its responsibilities are limited.<sup>148</sup>

To be sure, should a mechanism even be set up, it would face a considerable challenge. Ironically, the fact that there is no exchange of fire would make the agenda more elusive: discussions would deal with undisclosed activity, such as arms transfers, which are hard to prove and harder to acknowledge; rhetoric, which is difficult to regulate; and intentions, which are virtually impossible to measure. The more visible forms of behaviour today are those in which the IDF engages – namely over-flights and occupation of Lebanese land – but Israel logically would insist on an equally concrete and verifiable quid pro quo if it were to reduce them.

All this stands in stark contrast to the pre-2006 situation, when – through U.S. mediation and generally only after episodes of violence – belligerents more or less abided by basic guidelines: Israel focused its operations in southern Lebanon and, after the Qana tragedy in 1996, when in response to indiscriminate Hizbollah rocket fire, it shelled a UN compound harbouring hundreds of Lebanese civilians, made a serious effort to avoid civilian casualties;<sup>149</sup> Hizbollah chiefly targeted Israeli troops, mostly in Lebanon; and Syria restricted its involvement, eschewing any direct intervention and seemingly abiding by self-imposed limits on the types and sophistication of weapons systems transferred to Hizbollah.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> An Israeli defence official said, “the tripartite mechanism deals mainly with minor complaints and grievances”. Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>149</sup> Israel and Hizbollah agreed on a set of understandings in the aftermath of violent confrontation in 1996 to restrict their operations and channel any claims of violation through an international monitoring group. “In April 1996, the parties agreed, under U.S. sponsorship, not to undertake any activity within 500 metres of populated areas. The understanding established a monitoring group, under a French/U.S. rotating chairmanship. Permanent members, besides the two chairs, were Syria, Israel and Lebanon. The UN provided the facilities but was not directly involved. Following a claim of violation, the chair would convene all five representatives to a meeting, which in itself would allow tempers to cool. When investigations were deemed necessary, the monitoring group made sure they would last a long time. All in all, Israel essentially acknowledged its status as an occupying force and tolerated Hizbollah’s attacks on Israeli troops and the SLA [the South Lebanese Army, an Israeli-backed militia] forces in Lebanon. No Hizbollah attacks took place across the border, however, and Israel steered clear of Lebanese civilians”. Crisis Group interview, Timur Goksel, former UNIFIL spokesman, Beirut, March 2010.

<sup>150</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah, Syrian and UN officials, Beirut and Damascus, May 2010.

A UN official complained about the current “absence of a comprehensive approach” and of a consultative mechanism. “The UN does not have a clear mandate in this respect, but who else is there? Ultimately, the U.S. ought to feel concerned because, should war break out, they will have to shoulder a huge responsibility”.<sup>151</sup> Summing up, a Hizbollah official said, “there are no rules, and that’s what makes all scenarios possible and increases the chances of a far more violent war. The only rule today is the balance of terror”.<sup>152</sup>

## **B. AN UNWANTED WAR?**

As seen above, given the high stakes of a future conflict, the parties for the most part believe that a war would stem from a deliberate decision. While that might be the more likely scenario leading to a confrontation, it would be wrong to exclude the possibility of an escalation occurring independently of the belligerents’ original intent.

### **1. Risks of miscalculation**

In a sense, the conviction that neither side will want to provoke a war of potentially devastating consequence is one reason why one or the other might feel emboldened to take further risks, secure in the knowledge its foe will want to avoid escalation.

Thus, Israel might target a weapons storage facility in Lebanon or Syria; it might also attack a Hizbollah-bound weapons convoy it viewed as being particularly dangerous.<sup>153</sup> By the same token, Hizbollah might at some point decide to reassert itself – for example if it were to feel that a strictly defensive posture was gradually eroding its legitimacy – by, say, retaliating against violations of Lebanese airspace which are a constant irritant for the Lebanese in general<sup>154</sup> and whose intelligence-gathering

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<sup>151</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, March 2010.

<sup>152</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, March 2010.

<sup>153</sup> A UN official said, “Hizbollah might acquire more sophisticated weaponry that could provoke Israel to take action. Under that situation, one might expect a targeted attack rather than full-scale war. But the existing security framework would be sorely tested”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, March 2010. A Hizbollah leader bolstered this view: “Israel might miscalculate and mount a limited operation on the assumption that Hizbollah would have a minimal reaction or none at all. But it could affect the balance of power, in which case Hizbollah would react strongly. Israel keeps saying that it will attack a missile convoy; so far, they haven’t, because they fear the consequences would be dire”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>154</sup> On Lebanese reactions, see, eg, Patrick Galey, “Israel’s Night-Time Over-Flights Heighten Lebanon Tensions”, *The Daily Star*, 26 February 2010.

represent a security liability for Hizbollah in particular.<sup>155</sup> An Israeli government adviser expressed a more widely-shared concern: "Hizbollah may launch rockets against an Israeli airplane if they become confident that they are powerful enough. They could miscalculate – as they did with the kidnapping that triggered the last war".<sup>156</sup> Under any of these scenarios, Israel, Hizbollah and possibly others would have to calibrate their response, balancing between the needs to maintain deterrence and avoid escalation.

An accidental war could stem from some other chain of events. Since 2006, at least some of the rockets fired from Lebanon into Israel have been attributed to stray, typically Palestinian groups. These crude missiles so far have caused no casualty,<sup>157</sup> and Israel has made a point of retaliating in ways that minimise chances of escalation – usually firing artillery rounds into open areas.<sup>158</sup> Still, the risk of a deadly strike is ever present. Depending on circumstances, Israel might be drawn to retaliate in ways that spiral out of control.<sup>159</sup> A senior UN official said, "although nobody might want it, a new round remains possible because the threshold is so low. A rocket that killed an Israeli civilian, an elderly woman or a young child, might well provoke a serious Israeli response".<sup>160</sup>

The latest source of anxiety relates to the international tribunal investigating Rafic Hariri's 2005 assassination. Widespread speculation that Hizbollah members and officials soon would be indicted was given further weight when, on 23 July 2010, Nasrallah asserted that Prime

Minister Hariri had "informed [him] that the tribunal will accuse some undisciplined [Hizbollah] members" of involvement in the murder of his father.<sup>161</sup> Nasrallah has spoken repeatedly about the tribunal in recent days, challenging its legitimacy and suggesting an Israeli conspiracy, providing a clear indication of the degree to which the movement is worried about potential indictments.<sup>162</sup> As a result, domestic tensions have escalated markedly, with fears of sectarian strife rising once more.

Some analysts and UN officials have gone further, wondering whether the Shiite organisation might seek to shift the focus by raising tensions with Israel.<sup>163</sup> Although such indictments could well have destabilising effects in Lebanon, it is less clear how they might trigger renewed confrontation with Israel: in the aftermath of a highly destructive round of fighting, Hizbollah is unlikely to be in a stronger position to fend off domestic or international pressure related to the tribunal.<sup>164</sup>

## 2. The undercover war

The least visible dimensions of the ongoing tensions involving Israel, Hizbollah, Syria and Iran are not necessarily the most trivial. During the past several years, indications repeatedly have surfaced of a secretive, at times brutal battle.

Lebanon claims to have uncovered extensive Israeli spy rings operating on its territory.<sup>165</sup> A series of high-profile assassinations for which there have been no claim of responsibility – albeit an abundance of suspicion – have taken place, targeting inter alia Muhammad Sleiman, a Syrian general and Assad adviser, and, most prominently, on 13

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<sup>155</sup> An Israeli official said, "we know the over-flights are seen by all Lebanese as humiliating. For them, they are a thorn in the eye, but we cannot stop them. They serve important intelligence-gathering purposes which clearly serve our interests as long as Hizbollah violates 1701 and remains a state within a state". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010. A senior Hizbollah official commented: "By our count, since 2006 Israel has conducted over 10,000 sorties, which amount to more than five per day on average. We know what the purpose is: to take pictures of sites, map targets and mark them with signals in advance of future strikes. They are offensive measures. For now, we haven't responded militarily, but political and practical conditions could change. We have not written off this possibility". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>156</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, April 2010.

<sup>157</sup> Of the seven such occurrences registered by the UN between the August 2006 cessation of hostilities and March 2010, none hit a meaningful target. These operations generally have been amateurish; most missiles appeared to be aimed at nothing in particular and did not even reach Israel. Crisis Group interview, UNIFIL official, Beirut, March 2010.

<sup>158</sup> Crisis Group interview, UNIFIL official, Beirut, March 2010.

<sup>159</sup> An Israeli official noted: "In terms of an involuntary escalation, what worries me most are missiles fired from Palestinian camps". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, July 2010.

<sup>160</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, September 2009.

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<sup>161</sup> See [www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&CD2280D1D0BD5B4EC22577680051689E](http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&CD2280D1D0BD5B4EC22577680051689E).

<sup>162</sup> In his 16 July 2010 speech, Nasrallah explicitly linked the international probe to the arrest of spies allegedly working for Israel and described the forthcoming indictments as "fabricated". Speaking of the tribunal, he said, "the main goal was to target the Resistance. [Israel] knows that any internal tension plays in its favor, regardless of who is responsible for it". He explained that after the Israelis failed in the 2006 July War, they "are now betting on another Israeli project called the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, which for months now they have been preparing for". Nasrallah also suggested possible complicity of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces Intelligence Bureau. See [www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=186498#ixzz0uuhM0bXq](http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=186498#ixzz0uuhM0bXq).

<sup>163</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, July 2010.

<sup>164</sup> In response to a question on that matter, Nasrallah said, "We don't have the intention to wage or start a war in the region at the moment". See [www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&CD2280D1D0BD5B4EC22577680051689E](http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&CD2280D1D0BD5B4EC22577680051689E).

<sup>165</sup> Hizbollah and the Lebanese authorities seem to have cooperated seamlessly on this issue. See, for instance, Adrien Jaulmes, "Beyrouth, nid d'espions", *Le Monde*, 14 September 2009.

February 2008, Imad Mughniyé, a senior Hizbollah security figure.<sup>166</sup> Hizbollah has yet to successfully retaliate for Mughniyé's death, though it insists it will do so;<sup>167</sup> Israeli officials claim that in fact the movement already has carried out several attempts that either failed or were thwarted.<sup>168</sup> One certainly cannot exclude a revenge attack which – depending on its nature – could trigger a far broader conflict.<sup>169</sup> Nor should one rule out an assassination arising out of a target of opportunity on which Israel or Hizbollah would find it difficult to pass.<sup>170</sup>

In the words of one of President Assad's advisers: "Nowadays, the struggle is being fought underground, through intelligence services",<sup>171</sup> where rules of the game are even

more opaque and where one or the other party could cross a red line without it being publicly known.

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<sup>166</sup> Mughniyé, accused by Israel and the U.S. in particular of having masterminded several terrorist attacks, was killed in the heart of Damascus.

<sup>167</sup> Naïm Qassem, Hizbollah's deputy secretary general, vowed once more to avenge Mughniyé in a mid-February interview. *Al-Nahar*, 14 February 2010. On the same day, Nasrallah said Hizbollah's retaliation would be commensurate to the victim's stature; insofar as the movement has paid impressive tribute to Mughniyé, this set the bar quite high. Lebanese National News Agency, 16 February 2010.

<sup>168</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials, Jerusalem, December 2009. According to a former Israeli intelligence officer, "Hizbollah has tried to avenge Mughniyé's death on several occasions – in Azerbaijan, in Turkey, at a U.S. site, tourist sites in the Sinai and even [targeting] the Israeli chief of staff". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, May 2010.

<sup>169</sup> An Israeli official said, "so far, Hizbollah has not avenged Mughniyé's death. Its attempts in Turkey and Azerbaijan failed, but they might succeed in the future – along the lines of the attempted assassination of Shlomo Argob [the Israeli ambassador to the UK, the failed attempt against whom in 1982 by a Palestinian organisation was invoked by Israel as the justification for the first Lebanon war]. It could be anything, like the bombing of a synagogue in Bombay. Whatever the case, Israel would respond. What would Hizbollah do then? Who would be accused of starting the conflict?" Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010. A government adviser added: "They have an unsettled account with us – Mughniyé. But they need to be very careful that what they do does not trigger the kind of reaction they would not want". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, April 2010.

<sup>170</sup> An Israeli government adviser asked: "If we have the opportunity to take out the entire Hizbollah leadership or all its anti-aircraft missiles, would we do it? Today's quiet is artificial and temporary. In this sense, Hizbollah's fear of an Israeli attack is both reasonable and justified". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>171</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2010. Significantly, the 19 January 2010 assassination in Dubai of Mahmoud Mabhuh, a Hamas official – during which Israel's agents appeared to leave behind uncharacteristically transparent clues – affected the regional atmosphere well beyond the Palestinian arena. It bolstered the impression that there were little or no limits in the undercover struggle. A U.S. official acknowledged: "The Mabhuh assassination had a considerable impact on the region as a whole and on Syrians in particular, who felt

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that a new line was being crossed by Israel without serious consequence". Crisis Group interview, Washington, May 2010. Since the assassination, the UK, Ireland, and Australia have expelled Israeli diplomats to express their anger at the use of stolen passports from their citizens in the operation. Poland extradited to Germany an Israeli diplomat suspected of having forged a German passport. [www.bbc.co.uk/news/10541332](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10541332).

## IV. CONCLUSION

By virtue of having established a regime of mutual deterrence, Israel, Hizbollah and the movement's allies appear to have lowered the prospects for an imminent resumption of hostilities. The situation could well persist, by virtue of the expected scale and scope of another war. Indeed, there are some hints that deterrence is succeeding in constraining behaviour: despite widespread (albeit unsubstantiated) suspicion that Hizbollah already has acquired anti-aircraft missiles, it has not deployed them, arguably for fear of provoking a disproportionate Israeli response; by the same token, Israel claims it could have struck at a Syrian arms convoy, but ultimately, did not.

Yet, it would be mistaken and foolhardy to place the entirety of one's hopes in the emerging balance of fear. Beneath the surface, tensions are mounting, and there is no mechanism in place to either address or ease them. There are no prospects on the peace process; no forward movement on 1701; no genuine political communication between the parties; no discernible exit from the current impasse. The underlying dynamics of the logic of deterrence also carry the seeds of a possible breakdown. As Hizbollah's firepower grows, so too does Israel's desire to tackle the problem before it is too late – as it were, to wage a war in order to preserve the option of conducting a subsequent one. In short, what is holding the current architecture in place is also what could rapidly bring it down.

At bottom, the only hope for a real and durable solution lies in credible peace negotiations – and, ultimately, agreements – between Israel on the one hand and Syria and Lebanon on the other. This remains the only non-military means of dealing with Hizbollah's weapons.<sup>172</sup> In their absence, Hizbollah will not cease to bolster its arsenal, Syria will not stop assisting in that endeavour or accept reliable border-control mechanisms, and Israel will continue developing its own counter-measures. In short, military preparations will continue, collective violations of 1701 will persist, and serious implementation of the resolution will remain a dead letter as long as the underlying conflict persists. For that reason, the U.S. ought to intensify what so far have been sincere but lukewarm attempts to revive negotiations. In the meantime, though,

steps should be taken to try to break the current stalemate, help defuse tensions and minimise the risk of an accidental confrontation.

**Advancing Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanese Peace Talks.** The Obama administration has not altogether ignored the Syrian track; together with his team, Senator George Mitchell, the U.S. Special Envoy for Peace, has sought to restart talks through deliberate, painstaking discussions with both sides. The focus has been twofold: on the one hand, to "chip away at Israeli resistance" to commit to a withdrawal to the 1967 lines (Syria's requirement for resuming talks under any shape);<sup>173</sup> on the other, to persuade Syria that "the possibility of a peace agreement exists, even with this Israeli government" and to extract from Damascus a clearer sense of how its relations with Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah would evolve in the event of a peace deal.<sup>174</sup>

What has been lacking is high-level, presidential engagement and, just as importantly, the sense that this too is a U.S. priority. Obama has yet to insert himself in this matter; in his most recent meeting with Netanyahu, he reportedly raised the issue but pushed no further after the prime minister countered that he could not move on both the Palestinian and Syrian fronts at once.<sup>175</sup> Instead, Washington has concentrated the bulk of its peace efforts on the Palestinian track, convinced that it is at the core of the Israeli-Arab conflict, that it resonates most deeply among Arab and Muslim public opinion and thus that it would do most to stabilise the region. Although there is considerable truth to the argument, it neglects the enormous impact meaningful progress with Syria would have on the region as a whole, including prospects for a Palestinian agreement and changes in Tehran's, Hizbollah's and Hamas's outlook.<sup>176</sup>

<sup>172</sup> As Crisis Group wrote in 2006, Hizbollah's armed status "is closely linked with regional issues, including Syria's and Iran's role and activation (or not) of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace process .... Serious steps to resume Arab-Israeli negotiations on both the Palestinian and Syrian tracks, coupled with a decision by the West to engage Syria and Iran on all issues of regional concerns, including their regional concerns, would allow efforts at de-militarising Hizbollah and stabilising Lebanon to take place in a far safer, less explosive situation". Crisis Group Report, *Climbing Out of the Abyss*, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>173</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, June 2010. As another U.S. official said, explaining Syria's view, "in the 1990s and again in 2008, the Syrians entered into negotiations with Israeli prime ministers who were prepared to commit to a full withdrawal. Even then, the talks did not succeed. Why would they engage in talks with a prime minister who was not prepared to reiterate that stance?" Crisis Group interview, Washington, July 2010.

<sup>174</sup> "The question that Bibi [Netanyahu] will have to answer in Israel if he is to get this done is the following: 'Would Israel be more secure after an agreement than before?'" At this point in time, he cannot reply in the affirmative because there is little to no clarity regarding what Syria would do with Iran, Hamas or Hizbollah. Israelis believe that, if they return the Golan and Syria's posture remains unchanged, they would have expended their principal card in exchange for nothing. They would have nothing left to pressure Damascus". Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, June 2010.

<sup>175</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, July 2010.

<sup>176</sup> These arguments are more fully developed in earlier Crisis Group reports. See in particular, *Syria's Evolving Strategy* and *Syria's New Hand*, both op. cit.

The absence of any movement on the Syrian track is fuelling unwelcome and mutually reinforcing dynamics. Support among Israel's military-security establishment for a Syria deal, although still strong,<sup>177</sup> is said to have been eroding as reports of heightened arms deliveries to Hizbollah have surfaced. In the words of a U.S. official, "they are still committed, especially [Defence Minister] Barak, but with a greater sense of doubt. In light of deepening ties to Iran and Hizbollah, they are questioning some of their earlier assumptions even as they cling to them".<sup>178</sup> At the same time, receding prospects of serious negotiations – coupled with declining hopes of a bilateral breakthrough with the U.S. and fear of a reduced regional role – have encouraged Syria to grow closer to its allies, thus reinforcing Israel's own negative perception of a regime that is deliberately and confidently moving in that direction.

As this report has documented, Syria's behaviour reflects more complex calculations. Its posture is, in a sense, deeply paradoxical – a regime vastly outmatched in terms of conventional military power, which would not stand a chance in a confrontation with Israel, and yet which seems prepared to throw in its lot with a militant axis whose actions could well spark a conflict. The reason is not that Syria no longer wishes to resume peace talks; indeed, U.S. officials report that Damascus recently has sent repeated and insistent feelers in that regard.<sup>179</sup> Rather, it is that Syria at this point does not believe in the possibility of serious talks and thus perceives no realistic alternative to its current stance.

As the probability of war rises, and as the scale of that potential war expands, it sees no choice but to seek to deter that outcome through a sizeable build-up and deepened ties with its current allies. In contrast, the regime is convinced that to show restraint would not seriously diminish risks of conflict (which are tied to regional dynamics beyond Damascus's control), would not necessarily spare Syria (which, faced with the possibility of a Hizbollah setback hugely costly to its regional interests, would at a minimum feel compelled to replenish the movement's stocks and thus could provoke an Israeli attack) and would strain its existing alliances. Hence the odd condition whereby, in a U.S. official's words, measures "Syria is taking to

prevent a war also increase the risk that it will be drawn into one".<sup>180</sup>

Syria harbours another concern affecting its decision-making. Achieving a peace deal would come at a measurable cost: the loss of the strategic posture that, for decades, has provided the regime with an influence far out of proportion to its population size, economic wealth or military capacity.<sup>181</sup> Short of a convincing substitute, it fears finding itself cut down to size, losing old alliances without necessarily gaining new ones and without enjoying the benefits of a new regional role.

The challenge for the U.S. in particular is to present Syria with a compelling vision of its place in a post-peace environment. This could include, *inter alia*, discussing not only how it would loosen its ties to Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah, but also how it could use such relations to influence those allies' behaviour. Of equal importance to Damascus would be the nature of its future relationship with Iraq and Lebanon. All these factors would affect the regime's cost-benefit strategic calculus, and none could be addressed without sustained, high-level engagement.<sup>182</sup> The narrow and sporadic dialogue that has taken place until now cannot suffice.<sup>183</sup>

**Restoring Momentum to Security Council Resolution 1701.** As Crisis Group wrote in the aftermath of the war, that document was constrained from the outset by its inherent limits:

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<sup>180</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2010.

<sup>181</sup> An analyst put it as follows: "Israel would win a role in the region as a result of peace; Syria could lose its own". Crisis Group interview, July 2010.

<sup>182</sup> A U.S. official reflected on this dimension of Bashar al-Assad's concerns: "Assuming Netanyahu can get to the point where he is prepared to repeat what Prime Minister Rabin said [about withdrawing to the 1967 lines] – and he is not there yet – the question is whether Bashar would be prepared to make the strategic shift his father was prepared to make. For Hafez, acquiring a new relationship with the U.S. seemed enough. It is not clear that remains the case. We need to begin a dialogue with Bashar on the future of Syria's relations with Iraq and Lebanon, and we should enlist Saudi Arabia in that effort. Otherwise, I fear Bashar will see the strategic price he pays, but not the strategic reward". Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2010.

<sup>183</sup> To date, aside from George Mitchell – whose focus, understandably, has been on the Palestinian track – the administration has dispatched Under Secretary for Political Affairs William Burns once. Burns is much appreciated in Damascus, but the broad discussion of regional dynamics he initiated during his February 2010 visit was not followed up. In fact, the most effective interlocutor by far has been a member of the legislative branch, Senator John Kerry, the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, who has developed a close relationship with Bashar. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian and U.S. officials, Damascus and Washington, December 2009-June 2010.

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<sup>177</sup> This is particularly the case for Defence Minister Ehud Barak, who enjoys influence with Netanyahu and has been seeking to convince him for months (so far unsuccessfully) of the importance of resuming talks with Syria. Crisis Group interviews, Israeli and U.S. officials, Jerusalem and Washington, December 2009-June 2010.

<sup>178</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, June 2010.

<sup>179</sup> A U.S. official said, "they are making it clear in many ways they want to find a way to resume talks with Israel". Crisis Group interview, Washington, July 2010.

1701 is not the proper framework for the necessary resolution of underlying issues in the Israeli-Lebanese relationship, and it must not be construed as such .... [I]t unwisely seeks to internationalise a particular aspect of the problem (Hizbollah's armament) without regionalising its solution (addressing the broader Arab-Israeli conflict or the growing U.S.-Iranian differences).<sup>184</sup>

Any hope that the resolution's core objectives – notably full respect for Lebanon's sovereignty, securing the Lebanese-Syrian border and disarming Hizbollah – could be achieved at this stage would be illusory. Still, lack of any progress toward 1701's fulfilment only further fuels tensions. Instead, the UN could focus on what remains of the realistically achievable goals, most prominently among them resolving the question of Ghajar. In this respect, the UN could revive – and the U.S. as well as other interested parties support – efforts to achieve an Israeli withdrawal from the northern (Lebanese) part, placing the village under UNIFIL control with a Lebanese army (LAF) presence.<sup>185</sup>

There is ample reason to be modest about what even that step would accomplish. A UN official acknowledged: "The UN likes Ghajar, because it is actually an achievable goal. Apart from that, there is little reason to get overexcited about it".<sup>186</sup> The main purpose of a solution would be to breathe some life into 1701, provide a sense of movement where there has been nothing but paralysis and, perhaps, pave the way for discussions on (albeit not solutions to) more intractable 1701-related questions. A senior Lebanese defence official put it as follows:

For us, Ghajar is above all a question of sovereignty, but it's also about implementing 1701. Without movement on Ghajar, we can't hope to shift, one day, to Shebaa. Without some form of progress, states contributing to UNIFIL's troops, whose mission is to implement 1701, may lose a sense of purpose. So making headway on Ghajar would be good for UNIFIL, for the UN more generally, for us Lebanese and for the Israelis too.<sup>187</sup>

Additionally, Lebanon should significantly increase the number and capacity of LAF troops deployed in the South to help prevent incidents. As seen, there currently are fewer than 5,000, even though Resolution 1701 referred to a target of 15,000. In late July, the Lebanese government indicated it would increase the number by roughly 1,500; as this report was being finalised, that information had not been confirmed. Officials from both UNIFIL and troop contributing countries commented that the expansion would be insufficient and that, as importantly, Lebanese troops needed to be better trained and equipped.<sup>188</sup>

**Enhancing Political Contacts.** In the mid- to late-1990s, and for all its deficiencies, the Israel-Lebanon Monitoring Group (comprising the U.S., France, Israel, Syria and Lebanon) served as a useful forum; it neither prevented clashes nor resolved underlying disputes, yet it was a mechanism to air and investigate grievances and thus a safety valve of sorts. No functional equivalent exists today; the tripartite mechanism – UNIFIL and the Israeli and Lebanese military – is useful, but its mandate and membership seriously constrain its utility; moreover, the issue today is not dealing with events on the ground but rather, as discussed, with less tangible questions of intent, red lines, verbal skirmishes and potential miscommunication. In addition, the U.S. and Syria engaged in the 1990s in high-level discussions on a virtually continual basis, which is not the case today.

The political vacuum is all the more striking given rising tensions and escalating rhetoric. As a senior UN official put it, "what we need is a forum in which the parties can talk, almost regardless of what they would discuss".<sup>189</sup> Finding the right mechanism, and ensuring it is acceptable to all parties, will not be self-evident, though several options could be considered.

The UN's responsibilities might be boosted by either attaching a more political dimension to the current trilateral security mechanism or enhancing the role of UNSCOL, the UN's political representative in Lebanon, so that it is fully empowered and able to more broadly discuss with the parties steps to prevent a breakdown and prerequisites for a formal ceasefire. In principle, the international body is a suitable actor, given its presence on the ground and ability to communicate with all parties, Hizbollah included. However, both UNIFIL and Lebanese officials view expanding the tripartite mechanism as counterproductive,

shift the paradigm from mutual threats to shared objectives. Even if it doesn't produce an agreement, it would improve the atmosphere". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

<sup>188</sup> A French official remarked: "It is a positive decision, but it is insufficient. Remember that 1701 speaks of 15,000 troops". Crisis Group interview, July 2010.

<sup>189</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, July 2010.

<sup>184</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Avoiding Renewed Conflict*, op. cit., p. ii.

<sup>185</sup> A UN official explained that, due to differences between Israel and Lebanon, discussions were frozen for several months but resumed in December 2009. Some of the stumbling blocks involve security arrangements following Israel's withdrawal from the north, policing and law and order in that area and issues related to jurisdiction over Ghajar residents, who hold Israeli citizenship. Crisis Group interview, July 2010.

<sup>186</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, New York, May 2010.

<sup>187</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010. His words were echoed by a UN official who stressed that the goal was not to reach a ceasefire but to at least momentarily shift the governing dynamics: "A dialogue of this nature could help shift gears and



wary as they are of injecting a political dimension to what has been a workable, albeit modest, forum for exchanges among military parties.<sup>190</sup> To an extent, the UN's political mission in Lebanon is filling the communications gap, indirectly conveying messages between Israel, Hizbollah and Syria – alternatively to warn or to reassure – by virtue of its contacts with all parties.<sup>191</sup> Yet, however welcome, such channels for now are neither systematic nor methodical.

This touches on a far broader issue, namely the proliferation of offices and confusion of roles in the UN's overall set-up with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and Lebanon in particular. Besides UNSCOL and UNIFIL, these include the UN Special Coordinator's Office for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO), the Special Envoy for the implementation of Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1680, the UN Truce Supervision Organisation (UNTSO) and the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF). Yet, there is no clear, overall strategic framework guiding these disparate missions and offices and insufficient coordination between them. The UN undoubtedly has a significant part to play. To do so effectively, however, would require managing them based on a more centralised and coherent leadership and policy.<sup>192</sup> At a minimum, the UN ought to consolidate 1701 implementation in the office of the Special Coordinator, with a view to more effective engagement with the stakeholders.<sup>193</sup>

In an effort to revive the Israel-Lebanon Monitoring Group and adapt it to current circumstances, consideration also has been given to creation of a contact group aimed at discussing 1701 implementation and addressing possible flashpoints – defusing potential misunderstandings, regulating the war of words, keeping tensions out of the public eye or clearly conveying specific proposals, reassurances or warnings.<sup>194</sup> In its most ambitious incarnation,

such a group could comprise the UN, U.S., France, Israel, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey (whose strong relations with Syria would be extremely useful and whose frayed relations with Israel such a forum might seek to repair).

Given the current regional landscape, expectations as to any of these mechanisms ought to be tempered. Asked about the potential benefit of new forms of dialogue and engagement, a senior Hizbollah official said:

Attempts at clarifying the rules of the game or defusing tensions between us and Israel are bound to fail. At best, they can help to gain time. But they cannot achieve any lasting results. In the interim, pressure on Iran will increase; Gaza will remain under siege; and threats against Lebanon will endure. It is hard to speak of appeasing the situation in this context. The region is moving, it is fluid and it cannot be frozen in place through mere dialogue.<sup>195</sup>

For now though, and as the wait for meaningful peace talks goes on, such forms of engagement are the only and the best thing one can do.

**Beirut/Jerusalem/Damascus/  
Washington/Brussels, 2 August 2010**

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<sup>190</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, July 2010.

<sup>191</sup> A UN official said that Israel had asked him to convey to Syria that – notwithstanding public accusations regarding arms shipments to Hizbollah – it did not intend to mount operations on its soil. Crisis Group interview, July 2010. Another passed a message from Israel to Hizbollah to the effect that the deployment of anti-aircraft missiles in Lebanon would be considered an intolerable red line. Crisis Group interview, July 2010.

<sup>192</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, New York, May-July 2010.

<sup>193</sup> The current Special Coordinator is Michael Williams, an official with extensive experience in the UK Foreign Office and the UN Secretariat.

<sup>194</sup> An Israeli official highlighted some current difficulties: "There is a dual risk: misunderstanding the other side's message and poorly conveying your own. The need each side feels to show its constituency that it is prepared to deal with visible threats only aggravates the situation. What is needed is the capacity to understand how genuine or serious a particular message is. The absence of formal, explicit rules means there is far

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greater room for misperceptions". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010. As an example, another official offered the following: "Rhetoric escalated surprisingly quickly when Barak's speech – which suggested that the alternatives were comprehensive war or comprehensive peace – was thoroughly misconstrued in Damascus as threatening hostilities. Syria responded with unprecedented language, threatening Israeli citizens, and Foreign Minister Lieberman retorted that we would take them back to medieval ages". Crisis Group interview, Jerusalem, April 2010.

<sup>195</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2010.

## APPENDIX A

### MAP OF LEBANON



Map 4282 United Nations  
 January 2010

● GHAJAR    
  SHEEBA FARMS    
 - - - - - LINE A – OCCUPIED GOLAN HEIGHTS

*Location of Ghajar, Sheeba Farms and occupied Golan Heights demarcation added by Crisis Group*

Department of Field Support  
 Cartographic Section

## APPENDIX B

### ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by the former European Commissioner for External Relations Christopher Patten and former U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

Crisis Group's international headquarters are in Brussels, with major advocacy offices in Washington DC (where it is based as a legal entity) and New York, a smaller one in London and liaison presences in Moscow and Beijing. The organisation currently operates nine regional offices (in Bishkek, Bogotá, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Nairobi, Pristina and Tbilisi) and has local field representation in fourteen additional locations (Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Bujumbura, Damascus, Dili, Jerusalem, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, Port-au-Prince, Pretoria, Sarajevo and Seoul). Crisis Group currently covers some 60 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh,

Burma/Myanmar, Indonesia, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan Strait, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; in Europe, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Russia (North Caucasus), Serbia and Turkey; in the Middle East and North Africa, Algeria, Egypt, Gulf States, Iran, Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen; and in Latin America and the Caribbean, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti and Venezuela.

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The following institutional and private foundations have provided funding in recent years: Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Charitable Foundation, Clifford Chance Foundation, Connect U.S. Fund, The Elders Foundation, William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, Humanity United, Hunt Alternatives Fund, Jewish World Watch, Korea Foundation, John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Institute, Victor Pinchuk Foundation, Ploughshares Fund, Radcliffe Foundation, Sigrid Rausing Trust, Rockefeller Brothers Fund and VIVA Trust.

**August 2010**

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### CRISIS GROUP REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS ON MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA SINCE 2007

#### *Arab-Israeli Conflict*

- After Mecca: Engaging Hamas*, Middle East Report N°62, 28 February 2007 (also available in Arabic).
- Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, Middle East Report N°63, 10 April 2007 (also available in Arabic).
- After Gaza*, Middle East Report N°68, 2 August 2007 (also available in Arabic).
- Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, Middle East Report N°69, 10 October 2007 (also available in Arabic and French).
- The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Annapolis and After*, Middle East Briefing N°22, 20 November 2007 (also available in Arabic).
- Inside Gaza: The Challenge of Clans and Families*, Middle East Report N°71, 20 December 2007.
- Ruling Palestine I: Gaza Under Hamas*, Middle East Report N°73, 19 March 2008 (also available in Arabic).
- Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, Middle East Briefing N°23, 15 May 2008 (also available in Arabic).
- The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role*, Middle East Report N°78, 15 July 2008 (also available in French).
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- Nurturing Instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps*, Middle East Report N°84, 19 February 2009 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
- Gaza's Unfinished Business*, Middle East Report N°85, 23 April 2009 (also available in Hebrew and Arabic).
- Lebanon's Elections: Avoiding a New Cycle of Confrontation*, Middle East Report N°87, 4 June 2009 (also available in French).
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- Tipping Point? Palestinians and the Search for a New Strategy*, Middle East Report N°95, 26 April 2010 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).
- Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current*, Middle East Report N°96, 26 May 2010.
- #### *North Africa*
- Egypt's Sinai Question*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°61, 30 January 2007 (also available in Arabic).
- Western Sahara: The Cost of the Conflict*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°65, 11 June 2007 (also available in Arabic and French).
- Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°66, 11 June 2007 (also available in Arabic and French).
- Egypt's Muslim Brothers: Confrontation or Integration?*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°76, 18 June 2008 (also available in Arabic).
- #### *Iraq/Iran/Gulf*
- Iraq and the Kurds: Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis*, Middle East Report N°64, 19 April 2007 (also available in Arabic).
- Where Is Iraq Heading? Lessons from Basra*, Middle East Report N°67, 25 June 2007 (also available in Arabic).
- Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, Middle East Report N°70, 15 November 2007 (also available in Arabic).
- Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge*, Middle East Report N°72, 7 February 2008 (also available in Arabic).
- Iraq after the Surge I: The New Sunni Landscape*, Middle East Report N°74, 30 April 2008 (also available in Arabic).
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- Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon*, Middle East Report N°77, 10 July 2008 (also available in Arabic).
- Oil for Soil: Toward a Grand Bargain on Iraq and the Kurds*, Middle East Report N°80, 28 October 2008 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).
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- U.S.-Iranian Engagement: The View from Tehran*, Middle East Briefing N°28, 2 June 2009 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).
- Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble Along the Trigger Line*, Middle East Report N°88, 8 July 2009 (also available in Kurdish and Arabic).
- Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa*, Middle East Report N°89, 28 September 2009 (also available in Kurdish and Arabic).
- Iraq's Uncertain Future: Elections and Beyond*, Middle East Report N°94, 25 February 2010 (also available in Arabic).

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