

Israel: Sharon stirs up conflict with Syria and Iran

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Israel's Ariel Sharon is intent on exploiting the opportunity provided by US plans for war in the Middle East to press forward his aim of creating a Greater Israel. For months he has sought to stoke up the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and scupper any possibility for even the type of truncated Palestinian state promised under the Oslo Accords. Now he has significantly upped the ante, accusing Syria of supplying Hezbollah militants in south Lebanon with thousands of surface to air rockets capable of striking northern Israeli towns and cities and demanding Syria rein in the Islamic fundamentalist group. Hezbollah is on the US's list of proscribed terrorist organisations.

Sharon's accusation follows threats of military action against Lebanon if it diverts the waters of the Wazzani and Hasbani rivers, tributaries of the Jordan River that flow into Lake Tiberias in Israel and provide 10 percent of Israel's water. Israeli soldiers threatened to fire on Lebanese workers when the engineer leading the project knocked over a UN border marker and only pulled back when the UN forces arrived and restored the marker. Defence Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer immediately issued a warning to Lebanon, saying, "Israel cannot tolerate this diversion of the waters of the Hasbani.... I trust the Americans to stop it."

The US immediately despatched engineers and envoys to try to calm the situation. The chronic shortage of water in the region means that control of the Jordan River has always been a crucial factor determining relations between Israel, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. The failure of the US Johnston plan for an integrated approach to international use of the Jordan in the 1950s was one of the factors which led to war between Egypt and Israel in May-June 1967. Israel seized upon the war as an opportunity to extend its borders throughout all of what was once British Mandate Palestine and to encompass part of Syria. Such "natural" boundaries would be easier to defend and gave

Israel access to the Jordan and its headwaters.

The conflict points to an objective factor underpinning the decades-long conflict: the unviability of the small states carved out of the former Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire by Britain and France after World War I and the establishment of the Zionist state in 1948. The division of such a geographically crucial part of the Eastern Mediterranean, plus the sealing of Israel's borders by its hostile Arab neighbours, has severely disrupted communications and economic development throughout the region.

No sooner had the US appeared to have calmed the dispute over water than Israeli security officials accused Syria of trucking thousands of rockets into Lebanon. Israel claims that Hezbollah has 8-9,000 Katyusha rockets with a 12-mile range. But Iran has also supplied it with hundreds of Fajr-3 and Fajr-5 missiles, which have a range of up to four times the Katyusha rockets, making Haifa and other northern Israeli cities further south of Haifa vulnerable to attack.

Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon in May 2000 after occupying it for 18 years, but has continued to control an area in the foothills of the Golan Heights, near the headwaters of one of the tributaries of the Jordan, known as Shabaa Farms. While Hezbollah insists it is part of Lebanon, Israel claims it is Syrian and its armed forces patrol the border with Lebanon where Hezbollah sentries have set up camp under a United Nations watchtower.

Last spring, Hezbollah opened up a second front against Israeli military positions from the Shabaa Farms area in support of the Palestinians. A raid killed six Israelis in western Galilee. Hezbollah did not claim responsibility for the attack, but Israel maintains that it was carried out by Palestinians with Hezbollah support. After Hezbollah carried out a second attack on Israeli positions in April, Israel attacked Syrian military positions in Lebanon.

The US has sought to prevent the conflict escalating and

cutting across its efforts to secure Arab support for war against Iraq. Secretary of State Colin Powell, then on a visit to the Middle East, went to Damascus to insist that President Bashir al-Assad rein in Hezbollah and his appeal appeared to have been successful—easing fears that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could escalate. But last August, after a Hezbollah attack on two Israeli military outposts on Shabaa Farms when three Israeli soldiers were injured, Defence Minister Benyamin Ben-Eliezer stepped up threats against Syria and Lebanon. He warned them that they were playing with fire and sent F-16 fighter jets over Beirut in a show of force.

An Israeli official has also claimed that Iran, which competes with Syria for influence in Lebanon, has supplied thousands of missiles to Hezbollah and sent several hundred Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon—via Syria—for an attack on Israel in order to disrupt US plans for war against Iraq. He said, referring to Syria and Iran, “All these connections are going to be fully activated as we approach a pending US attack on Iraq in an effort to attack or disrupt it. Clearly the Iranians don’t want to see the US gain a strong foothold in the region.”

Syria has been at odds with Iraq for nearly 40 years, supporting Iran against Iraq during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, providing a safe haven for the Iraqi opposition, including the CIA-funded Iraqi National Congress, and supporting the US, Britain and their allies against Iraq in 1991. Recently, however, there has been something of a rapprochement. Trade resumed in 1997 and Syrian exports to Iraq grew from zero to \$1 billion last year. Syria is believed to have earned \$1 billion from selling its own oil and importing oil from Iraq through a pipeline reopened in 2000. Only last month, Iraq signed a new trade agreement with Damascus, including \$1 billion worth of deals in fertiliser and glass. Iraq has also offered to hand over Baghdad-based members of the Muslim Brothers, a Sunni Muslim group whose uprising in Hama was brutally suppressed with a loss of more than 2,000 lives by the previous president, Hafez al-Assad, in 1982.

Sharon appears to be pushing for US agreement on a far broader offensive in the region that includes supporting his plans for territorial expansion. Taking his cue from the Bush administration’s inclusion of Iran in Washington’s “axis of evil”, he is pushing to add Syria as well.

The logic of events dictates that the US will not and cannot limit its predatory ambitions to securing control of Iraqi oil. Dennis Ross, former President Bill Clinton’s special envoy to the Middle East, recently said of Iran and Syria, “We may have to face this problem on the eve of

going into Iraq. I think there will be a strong impulse on the part of the Iranians and to a lesser extent the Syrians because they fear they may be next. If suddenly there is a war waging between Israel and its neighbours, there will be pressure to deal with that issue first and shift attention away from Iraq. The Europeans and the Arabs will be the first”.

Richard Armitage, deputy US secretary of state, said that Hezbollah had made “the A-team of terrorists”. “We are going to go after them just like a high school wrestler goes after opponents,” he added, “We’re going to take them down one at a time.”

His comments were some of the strongest yet made against Hezbollah by a senior US official and raised fears in Lebanon that it constituted approval for an Israeli military strike. This follows US accusations last May that Syria was developing weapons of mass destruction and US legislation prohibiting people from several “rogue states”, including Syria, from entering the US. The US was furious at Syria’s backing for Iraq at the UN Security Council where Syria is a non-permanent member.

But while some in the Bush administration and Congress appear to go along with Israel’s bellicose line against its neighbours, this support is by no means unswerving or unanimous. Other factions within the administration believe that Sharon’s actions cut across US interests, at least in the short term. The Bush administration has told Congress that it opposes the Syria Accountability Act, currently being considered, that would impose sanctions against Syria which is designated as a “state sponsor of terrorism”.

David Satterfield, deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs, told Congress that while the US was concerned about Syria’s support for Hezbollah, “We do not believe this is the right time for legislative initiatives that could complicate or even undermine our efforts.” He made the point that Syria had cooperated in the struggle against Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda and added, “The President and the Secretary will need flexibility to determine what combination of incentives and disincentives will maximise cooperation and advance our goals.”



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