

Israel's "Northern Front": Relations with Syria and Lebanon

Barry Rubin, Ph.D.

Director, Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, Herzliya, Israel
Editor, Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA) Journal

The circumstances in the Middle East, including the situation on Israel's northern border, can only be understood in the shadow of a startling but extremely grave reality: Israel is the world's only country whose total destruction is openly sought by other countries and powerful movements.

Threats to wipe out Israel are made on a daily basis. On September 27, 2008, for example, the leader of Lebanese Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, told a mass rally that all of Israel is part of Palestine, "Palestine, from the sea to the river is the property of Arabs and Palestinians and no one has the right to give up even a single grain of earth or one stone, because every grain of the land is holy. The entire land must be returned to its rightful owners." Holy War, Nasrallah added, is the only way to achieve this goal.

Hezbollah is not a marginal group. It is part of Lebanon's government, possesses a large army, missiles, and the political-financial backing of Iran and Syria. In 2006, Hezbollah launched several raids on Israeli territory, the last of which resulted in the killing and kidnapping of soldiers within Israel.

From my perspective, Hezbollah's behavior cannot be attributed to Israel's holding of Lebanese nationals due to previous terrorist attacks or to an Israeli presence on Lebanese soil. Nasrallah's above-quoted speech came after the prisoner release. Israel withdrew from Lebanese territory—and was certified by the United Nations as having done so—almost a decade ago. In my opinion, there is little hope for a diplomatic solution given Hezbollah's hostility to Israel's existence. It also would seem that even the creation of a Palestinian state would not diminish—and indeed might well intensify—Hezbollah's aggressiveness.

Many observers of the region have pointed to Iranian and Syrian influence over Hezbollah as a major challenge to the peace process. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—most recently in his September 2008 speech to the United Nations General Assembly—and Spiritual Guide Ayatollah Ali Khomeini have made clear their commitment to Israel's elimination.

Moreover, it has been noted that Iran has direct and indirect influence on Israel's northern border, both through Syria, its principal ally, and Hezbollah, along with some military presence in Lebanon of its own. In the current Lebanese government, Hezbollah has veto power over all important decisions. Within Lebanon's military, there are considerable pro-Hezbollah factions.

Consequently, we are not dealing here with typical diplomatic considerations, such as defining borders or implementing confidence-building measures to dispel misunderstandings. The radical forces want conflict, not resolution.

The critical issue is not what or how much Israel—or the West in general—offers at the negotiation table but how the other parties approach the peace process.

This is the context of what is often called Israel's "northern front." For example, there is no reason why Israel could not have mutually beneficial and normal relations with Lebanon, except that powerful groups within the country and their foreign sponsors have defined Israel's destruction as their most passionately pursued goal.

Lebanon's March 14 movement government would have preferred peace if it was at all possible but, given the barriers, knew that any attempt in this direction was too risky. Indeed, because of their moderate views, a number of Lebanese politicians, journalists and judges were the targets of terrorist attacks. Ultimately, that government had to take Hezbollah, which does not favor peace with Israel, as a partner.

I believe that Israel has taken great risks and made great concessions in trying to achieve peace. Israeli negotiations with Egypt and Jordan have shown that these two countries are ready for peace. Similar efforts with the Palestinian Authority and Syria have been inconclusive.

Especially dispiriting was the fate of the 2006 post-war settlement in Lebanon. The United Nations, in Resolution 1701, brokered an agreement and the international community had the opportunity to stabilize the situation and demonstrate how diplomatic efforts can advance regional peace. Unfortunately, commitments to Israel were not kept. The enhanced United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) did not intervene to prevent arms smuggling or stop the rebuilding of Hezbollah fortified positions in the south. Rather than disarming Hezbollah, the resolution, in effect, succeeded in disarming the Lebanese government.

With respect to Israel-Syria negotiations mediated by Turkey, the challenge is not in the details of indirect talks, which—despite a positive spin by the participants at times—have gone nowhere. What is important are the factors underlying the situation.

Let us assume for the moment that Syria were to make peace with Israel in exchange for the return of the whole Golan Heights—something that the government turned down, for example, in 2000. There would be, no doubt, a few weeks of celebration. But what next? As Syria's rulers well know the costs are many and the benefits few. Large-scale Western aid and military sales are unlikely. Iran, Hezbollah and domestic militants would turn against the government, branding it as traitorous. At the same time, more moderate Syrians would demand a peace dividend in the form of freedom, democracy, and less military spending. Internal conflict would rise steeply while Syria would find itself without reliable allies, forced to abandon its goals not only of maintaining the regime but also of dominating its neighbors, especially Lebanon.

The very foundation of the regime would be undercut, and from Syria's perspective, it would be at the mercy of the West. If Western investment did occur, it would be at the cost of dismantling an economically backward state but one that is also very stable and profitable for the ruling elite and its supporters. The power of Sunni Muslim businesspeople would be enhanced despite their distaste for the regime of an Alawite minority. They would express their dislike of the rulers by backing either Islamist or liberal groups, probably both.

Among the costs for Syria would be:

- ◆ The ability to use the Arab-Israeli conflict at home to mobilize support, diverting attention from the Syrian government's failures.
- ◆ Use of the issue, and of its own sponsorship of radical Islamist groups in Lebanon and among Palestinians, to polish Syria's Islamic credentials and undercut any Islamist effort to overthrow the government.
- ◆ The alliance with Iran that brings Syria money, Islamic cover, strategic protection, subsidies for Syrian clients (Hezbollah, Hamas).
- ◆ The chance to pursue ambitious and profitable goals: controlling Lebanon, becoming master of the Palestinian issue, gaining influence in Iraq, and even seeking hegemony in the Arab world and the region.

On the other side, the cost of maintaining the present course is low. Syria's isolation has been broken. The regime is as popular at home as it can be, with nationalist rhetoric and a pro-Islamist foreign policy trumping low levels of freedom and living standards.

Aside from the weaker strategic situation, increased internal instability, and questionable economic improvements, a post-peace Syria would reap benefits. Making peace with Israel legitimizes a country whose interests are inevitably opposed to those of Syria's regime. To achieve peace, Syria would have to give up its main organizational assets (Hezbollah and Hamas) and the powerful tactic of terrorism. Moreover, Israel would inevitably be in a stronger position to oppose Syrian domination of Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinians, to battle growing influence for the Iran-Syria alliance.

The United States and Europe might or might not actively resist Syria's goals but they certainly are not going to endorse them. Why should Bashar al-Asad trust America and Europe when his current strategy is working well and he thinks he's on the winning side?

In contrast, Israel would gain everything and lose nothing by peace, on the sole condition that it was a real and lasting peace. Israel needs the Golan Heights only if it faces a potentially aggressive Syria in a new round of war where Syrian possession of the Golan

would pose great risks for Israel. For a lasting, stable peace, it is worth giving up the Golan, but not for anything less.

Moreover, if the conflict really ended and Syria ceased sponsoring terrorist groups that attack Israel, there would be no downside for Israel, which also could use the new situation as leverage in negotiating with other Arab states and with the Palestinians. In exchange for normal relations and full peace, Israel has made clear its readiness to give up the entire Syrian Golan Heights, except for a small, strategic area on Israel's side of the border that Syria seized after 1948.

Yet even knowing peace was not in the cards, both sides had very good reasons for negotiating. For Israel, there were several advantages. In domestic political terms, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert tried, ultimately unsuccessfully, to use the talks to stay in office arguing that he should not be forced out in the middle of potentially successful negotiations. Regionally, Israel wanted to encourage Syria to rein in Hezbollah and avoid another war on its northern front. Internationally, Israel sought to show the West that it was working hard for peace.

The case for negotiating without making a deal is even more compelling for Syria. This strategy recalls what Damascus did in the 1990s, when it gained many advantages by stretching out talks over nine years and then rejecting an agreement in 2000. Syria has been using this gambit successfully to get out of Western-imposed isolation, to regain control over Lebanon, to continue backing Sunni insurgents against American soldiers in Iraq without cost, and to prevent the convening of the international tribunal investigating Syrian involvement in terrorism against Lebanese politicians. Potentially, Syria also might gain economic aid and trade advantages while undermining Western support for Israel.

In this context, it makes perfect sense for Damascus to talk, thereby relieving pressure on the regime and obtaining concessions from Israel or the West. However, this does not necessarily mean that negotiations are not worth pursuing or do not bring some interim benefits. The likelihood of war on Israel's northern front is reduced unless a crisis occurs.

But it is as important to be skeptical as it is to be flexible. The idea that Syria can be split away from Iran is inaccurate; the concept that Syria should be given more and more in advance of taking any real steps toward a deal is counterproductive.

Despite the challenges, it is hoped that all of the parties will work to pursue peace.*

* *Editor's Note: Dr. Rubin's latest books include [The Truth About Syria](#), [The Tragedy of the Middle East](#) and [The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East](#).*