



SYRIA AND THE QUESTION OF WMD

By Eyal Zisser*

Syria is one of the most advanced Arab countries as far as development of WMD is concerned. It has a large arsenal of hundreds of advanced surface-to-surface missiles that can cover most parts of Israel. With Iranian and North Korean aid, Syria has developed chemical warheads for these missiles, posing a strategic threat to Israel. Syria's impressive arsenal of WMD created, as the Syrians hoped, an effective balance of terror between Syria and Israel. Against the background of total Syrian conventional military inferiority in any future war with Israel, one can understand the strategic importance for the Syrian regime of possessing an arsenal of WMD. The piece concludes that it is unlikely Syria will follow Libya's example and easily give up its WMD capabilities.

(This article was originally written for a project and conference on "Countering Threats in the Era of Mass Destruction: Accounts from the Middle East and Europe," co-sponsored by the GLORIA Center and The Military Centre for Strategic Studies (CeMiSS) of Italy.)

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003 and Libya's decision to cooperate in dismantling its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capacity both put the spotlight on Syria. Damascus's policy throughout the Iraqi crises aroused U.S. anger and even prompted President George W. Bush to adopt an unprecedented tone against Syria, emphasizing demands that it stop developing banned chemical weapons.(1)

The Syrians denied having banned weapons and just as quickly kicked the ball into the American court by proposing that the entire Middle East be declared a zone free of non-conventional weapons. They were also quick to deny reports that Syria let Saddam Hussein's regime hide weapons of mass destruction in their territory.(2) Washington, however, was not satisfied with Damascus's denials and the U.S. government made clear that it would be closely watching Syria's behavior.(3)

Only time will tell how much substance there is in these accusations

and American threats to do something if they proved true. But Syria does have a stockpile of chemical and biological weapons along with the means to deliver them using its impressive arsenal of advanced surface-to-surface missiles which can reach most of Israel's populated areas.

For Syria, more than any other Arab country in recent years, acquiring weapons of mass destruction, especially chemical weapons and advanced missile capability, was a central pillar of its national security concept. This was made clear by Syrian Information Minister Ahmad al-Hasan who, when asked about his reaction to the Libyan decision to give up plans to develop weapons of mass destruction, stated, "Syria is not Libya. The Libyans are far away from the front and from the enemy [Israel], and this is why Syria will never follow the Libyan course."(4)

WMD AS A WAY OF ACHIEVING STRATEGIC PARITY WITH ISRAEL

Already by the 1980s, Syria was working toward obtaining non-conventional weapons. These efforts were a main component in its nascent national security concept to achieve strategic parity with Israel. In keeping with this concept, the Syrians strove to establish not only military parity but full strategic parity--in the economic, social, technological and other spheres, as well.

This concept was developed against the background of Syria's regional and international weakness at that time, when that country found itself alone in its struggle against Israel after Egypt abandoned the confrontation and signed a peace treaty in 1979. Iraq, which the Syrians considered their strategic depth and who even helped it in the 1973 war, abandoned Syria. Baghdad separated itself from the Arab Rejection Front, which Syria had established after the Israeli-Egyptian peace accords, and later even went to war with Iran, leading to a break in relations with Damascus, which chose to back the Iranians. Syria experienced the taste of isolation during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 when it found itself alone in battle against Israel and suffered a bitter defeat.(5)

It was at this point that the Soviet Union came to Syria's aid and opened the Soviet arsenal to it, including items the USSR had previously refrained from selling to Syria. The ambitious concept of establishing strategic parity with Israel was thus born from a combination of no Arab, but apparent total Soviet backing in the conflict. Indeed, in the years following the 1982 war, the Syrian armed forces underwent an impressive qualitative and quantitative increase. It doubled in size from about a quarter of a million to half a million men and was equipped with advanced Soviet weapons, including SA-5 surface-to-air missiles and SS-21 surface-to-surface missiles.(6)

However, the Syrians quickly realized that their economy could not support the burden of the intended build-up of military strength. Their economy quickly came to the brink of bankruptcy. This prompted President Hafiz al-Asad to beat a substantial retreat, albeit not publicly, from his ambitious aim of achieving parity with Israel. However, Syria's troubles did not end there. Toward the end of the 1980s, the Soviet Union's economy also ran into significant difficulties. When the USSR collapsed in 1991, Syria was left alone in a threatening environment.(7)

In Syria's view the possibility that Israel would exploit these new realities and attack Syria was neither imaginary nor theoretical. Damascus's apprehension was rooted in its fear of Jerusalem and its image of the latter as a satanic foe bent on expansion whose ultimate aim was the defeat of Syria. The image of the United States since President Ronald Reagan in the eyes of the Syrians was not much better than that of Israel.

Syria is plagued by too many constraints to build up an army large and technologically sophisticated enough to match that of Israel. The two main checks on Syria's military development are the country's poor economy and that most of the world suppliers are closed to it either for political or financial reasons. This has led Syria, since the early 1990s, to base its national security increasingly on WMD as a kind of miracle cure that will, in the blink of an eye, narrow the ever-widening technological gap between Syria and Israel, most importantly between the air forces.

The fact that Israel itself has nuclear capability was an additional (but not the sole) reason Syria adopted this strategy. Already in the 1970s, it was argued that the Arabs could not ultimately defeat Israel because of its nuclear weapons. For example, it has been claimed that during the 1973 October War, Israel's nuclear capability was the reason Syrian forces did not cross into Israeli territory beyond

the June 4, 1967 line. Thus, Syria's desire to eliminate the advantage Israel derives from its possession of nuclear weapons is part of an overall strategy to find a way to obtain a future conventional military victory. At a minimum, Syria looks to chemical weapons as a way to achieve deterrence vis-à-vis Israel, given the latter's current conventional military superiority.(8)

Two specific events contributed to Syria's increased awareness of the importance of obtaining non-conventional weapons. The first was the 1980-1988 Iraq-Iran War in the course of which Saddam Hussein made considerable, and effective, use of chemical weapons and missiles (albeit conventional) against the Iranians. The use of these weapons proved to be Saddam's winning card, stopping the Iranian forces at the gates of Baghdad, and forcing Tehran to agree to a cease-fire advantageous to Iraq. One must assume the Syrians took note that Saddam's use of surface-to-surface missiles against Iranian civilian targets aroused almost no reaction, certainly not an effective one, on the part of the international community.

The second event was the Gulf War of 1991, during which the Iraqis fired Scud missiles on Israel. Using these weapons was effective since they paralyzed life in Israel for a considerable time and let Iraq portray itself in heroic terms to the Arab world. At the same time, the Syrians were also impressed by the way the United States launched its war against Iraq. The Americans began the war with an air strike against Iraq's military and economic infrastructure, critically damaging them without Iraq being able to respond effectively. The Syrians saw how in one fell swoop the entire Iraqi infrastructure was destroyed. In Damascus, quite naturally, the fear was that a scenario such as this could repeat itself on their soil, particularly in the event of an Israeli-Syrian confrontation in which Israel might want to utilize its

military might and its technological superiority, mainly its superior air force, to demolish Syria.(9)

It is no wonder, therefore, that since the early 1990s the Syrians have devoted considerable resources to WMD development, basing their national security concept on achieving the capability to create a balance of fear between Syria and Israel. One can assume that Syria's decision to move in this direction was also largely because Iran, and even more so North Korea, remained the only friendly countries prepared to open their pocketbooks and armories to the Syrians. By allying accordingly, Syria has adopted the patterns of behavior of Iran and North Korea.

In Syrian thinking, this Doomsday Weapon is designed to deter Israel from attacking Syria's infrastructure as the Americans did against Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War. In the past, during the 1973 war, for example, Israel reacted to Syria's success in breaking through Israeli defenses in the Golan Heights, with an air strike aimed at infrastructure sites all over Syria. The Syrians believe that the establishment of a balance of fear could deter Israel from reacting in the same manner, allowing the Syrians to exploit fully tactical military advantages if gained in a surprise attack, for example.(10) Toward the end of the 1990s, when the Syrian army grew weaker because of the decline in its weaponry's capability and quality, Syria's non-conventional disposition remained the deterrent means designed to allow it freedom of action against Israel through the use of the weapon of terrorism, mainly Hizballah. Apparently, these capabilities contributed to President Bashar al-Asad's indifference when requested by Israel in late 2000 to restrain Hizballah. Reportedly, Bashar replied that Syria was not afraid of Israel, which it could deal with by means of the missiles in its possession.(11)

Interviewed by the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir* in February 2002, Bashar elaborated:

Israel has elements of power that might tempt it, under the leadership of Ariel Sharon, who is in the grip of war mania, to embark on a vast military adventure. . . . Israel might indeed enjoy an advantage at the start of the war, but it will not be able to sustain this advantage over time until the end of the war, or control its results and win such a war. The Arab side, with ourselves in the lead, will be the side that determines the end of the war, that is, when and how it will end. We know that Israel has superiority in several military areas, but we have the capacity for firm resistance and determined decision-making. We do not intend to absorb blows in silence, and added to all this accept Israel's conditions for peace. . . . As far as we are concerned, our decision is clear: we will stand fast and will react to aggression even if the enemy destroys many of our infrastructure installations. Although we are a poor state, we can stand fast against him better than he imagines, and we can rebuild what he manages to destroy. But he should know that the damage that we can cause the enemy is greater than the damage he can cause us.(12)

Indeed, a broad debate has been going on in Israel for years on the issue of Syria's determination to acquire non-conventional weapons. There are those in Israel who think that these missiles and this weaponry are designed to allow Damascus to launch a pre-emptive strike against Israel already at the beginning of a possible Syrian surprise attack against it with the objective of neutralizing a

considerable part of Israel's military capabilities. However, most of the experts believe that this is a Domsday Weapon to be used if and when Syria is attacked. In any event, the very existence of this weaponry in the hands of a regime like the Syrian Ba'th regime and certainly under the control of a young and inexperienced leader like Bashar al-Asad is enough to cause concern in Israel.(13)

Worthy of mention in this context is the success of Hizballah in creating a balance of terror with Israel, which ultimately forced Israel to retreat from South Lebanon, was also a factor in the formulation of the concept of a Syrian balance of terror based on non-conventional warfare. As shall be discussed below, this has chiefly meant developing biological and chemical weapons, as well as the missiles to deliver them.(14)

NON-CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS IN SYRIA: MISSILE CAPABILITY

Already at the beginning of the 1970s, even before the Yom Kippur War, the Syrians equipped themselves with Frog surface-to-surface missiles with a 70km range. The Syrians fired these missiles, designed for tactical use on the battlefield, during the war at targets deep in Israeli territory. In one case they missed the mark (an Israeli airfield) and hit a civilian settlement in northern Israel, and Israel retaliated by striking targets inside Damascus.(15)

Following the war, the Syrians procured from the Soviet Union around 200 Scud-B surface-to-surface missiles whose range was 280km. These missiles provided Syria for the first time with the ability to strike civilian targets in Israel's heartland. After the 1982 war in Lebanon, and as part of the effort to achieve strategic parity with Israel, the Syrians procured SS-21 surface-to-surface missiles. This is an advanced tactical missile with a range of about 80km.(16)

However, it was the 1991 Gulf War which harbingered the accelerated Syrian

effort to equip itself with missiles. This was assisted by the improved economic situation realized by the generous grants that Syria received from Gulf Arab states in order to buy its support against Iraq as well as the discovery and initial production of oil in Syria itself. Both factors filled Syria's heretofore-empty coffers with billions of dollars. In the early 1990s, Syria procured from North Korea Scud-C missiles, whose range is 500km, in addition to initiating the development, with the assistance of North Korea and Iran, of an advanced version of Scud (referred to as Scud-D) with a range of up to 700km.

The cost of developing these missiles was estimated to be up to \$1 billion dollars, paid for with Syria's oil revenues earned in the 1990s and by financial aid from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. On at least one occasion, in early 1992, the Americans tried, as part of their efforts to keep the Middle East clean of WMD, to block the passage of North Korean ships carrying the missiles to Syria. However, the Syrians and the North Koreans outwitted them by means of a Russian airlift from North Korea and Iran directly to Syria. Estimates put the number of Scud-C and -D missiles in Syria's possession at about 60.(17)

The Syrians have a number of brigades equipped with surface-to-surface missiles. Over the past several years, there have been increasing reports of Syrian efforts to hide and camouflage the missiles they procured in a broad network of caves and underground tunnels dug in northern Syria. Since some of these missiles have a range of about 700km, there is no need to deploy them near the border with Israel in order to reach their targets. The more advanced Scud C and Scud D are believed to be launched from mobile launchers as was the case with the Iraqi Scud missiles during the first Gulf War.(18)

CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS

Alongside the build-up of their missile capabilities, the Syrians have invested efforts in developing a chemical weapons capability. It is generally accepted that already in the 1973 October War the Syrians had an arsenal of chemical weapons, possibly supplied to them by the Egyptians. However, since then the Syrians have invested considerable efforts in the development of chemical weapons, which reached their peak in the 1990s. The Syrians concentrated mainly on the development of the nerve gas Sarin and, since the early 1990s, the much more lethal VX gas.(19)

In addition, the Syrians have developed chemical warheads which could be delivered by their long-range missiles. The Soviets did not supply the Syrians with warheads of this kind and thus they are of local manufacture with North Korean and Iranian assistance. The Syrians are also able to deliver chemical weapons via aircraft as well, but given their knowledge of the Israeli air force's superiority over their own, the Syrians have apparently abandoned the idea of trying to use planes for this purpose--though in principle the option still exists.(20)

The result is that since the mid-1990s, and perhaps much earlier, the Syrians have had a chemical weapons capability beyond any regional country other than Iran.

There is very little information available on the development of biological weapons in Syria, but the Syrians are apparently investing efforts in developing biological weapons, including Anthrax and Cholera bacteria. These efforts are being carried out at the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSCR) in Damascus. The center is also responsible for the development of Syria's chemical weapons. An indication of the Syrian awareness in the effectiveness of such weapons can be found in an article in an Iranian newspaper published in April 2000 by former Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa

Tlas. The article was entitled "Biological (Germ) Warfare: A New and Effective Method in Modern Warfare."(21)

HIZBALLAH: SYRIA AND IRAN'S LONG ARM

In recent years, Hizballah has become part of Syria's strategic layout against Israel. This organization works closely with the Syrians, although not under total Syrian control, and also with Iranian support. Iran has reportedly supplied a few dozen al-Fajr 5 and 7 missiles to Hizballah, which can reach all of northern Israel with their 75km and 125km ranges (respectively), capable of reaching all of northern Israel, including as far south as Hadera. In mid-2004, it was also reported in Israel that the Iranians supplied Hizballah with even more advanced al-Fajr missiles with ranges of 225km--capable of reaching the outskirts of Tel Aviv.(22) According to other credible reports, from the Syrian standpoint--though not necessarily from that of Hizballah itself--Syrian military planners include the organization in its operational plans as if it were an integral part of the Syrian armed forces. Alongside the fact that such missiles are available to Hizballah, there have been increasing reports, albeit unconfirmed, that the organization has chemical weapons. It is difficult to assume that the Iranians or even the Syrians have provided Hizballah with weapons of that kind, but there can be no doubt that the organization's agenda includes the procurement of chemical weapons which would greatly improve its standing vis-à-vis Israel.(23)

What makes this threat so dangerous for Israel is the fact that the Syrians seem to have lost much of the control they had on Hizballah. This is a clear result of the fact that in the top of the political pyramid in Damascus sits today a weak and inexperienced leader, Bashar al-Asad. Bashar's weakened position was most evident in his relationship with the leader of Hizballah, Shaykh Hasan

Nasrallah. Nasrallah himself admitted at one time that he had never had a personal, face-to-face meeting with Hafiz al-Asad.(24) Asad senior probably saw no reason for such a meeting; he would have regarded Nasrallah as one more pawn.

Bashar, on the other hand, met with Nasrallah frequently, as if to bask in Nasrallah's victorious glow. Nasrallah was quick to cast his cloak of patronage over the young leader in Damascus: as if he would show the new boy the ropes. Nasrallah said on more than one occasion that Hizballah would support Bashar in securing his standing at home and protecting Syrian interests abroad--as though Bashar were incapable of doing so himself. Bashar's leadership looked especially uncertain when the Israeli-Lebanese border deteriorated in March and April 2002, against the background of the Israeli operation in the West Bank "Defensive Shield."

Bashar, faced with the deteriorating situation along the Israeli-Syrian border, appeared at a loss to comprehend its gravity or to cope with Hizballah, and did nothing to halt or moderate the organization's acts. This behavior was seen in Israel and in the West as stemming from Bashar's basic unwillingness to concede what he perceived to be a strategic card against Israel. Hizballah's belligerence, the young president seemed to believe in his inexperience, would enable the Arabs to weaken and possibly defeat Israel, as had happened in south Lebanon. According to Israeli reports, the Syrians delivered in early 2002 advanced tactical rockets to Hizballah for use against Israel, thereby encouraging the organization to maintain its anti-Israel belligerency. Bashar, these reports indicated, acknowledged to Western dialogue partners that the Syrians had integrated Hizballah into its defense system to compensate for the Syrian army's strategic weakness vis-à-vis Israel.(25)

SYRIA'S POLICY OF KEEPING THESE WEAPONS HIDDEN

The Syrians have taken care to maintain a low profile in everything having to do with the non-conventional weapons at their disposal. They have refrained from making any unnecessary declarations, which in their view might have attracted unwanted attention, and denied all reports of their having such weapons at all.

In the shadow of the Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations, the Americans and Israelis refrained from bringing up the matter of Syria's efforts to equip itself with WMD. The assumption was that a peace agreement, believed to be only a matter of time, would also solve the problem of WMD in the Syrians' arsenal.

A certain change took place in Syria with the death of Hafiz al-Asad and the rise of his son Bashar to rule. As was the case in other areas of his rule, in the matter of Syria's non-conventional weapons capability, Bashar was revealed as rash with a tendency to make mistakes. For example, Syria's policy on the question of the war in Iraq made some wonder about his ability to take well-considered decisions in crisis situations. Indeed, the accepted opinion among analysts is that while Hafiz al-Asad was a prudent leader who shied away from anything adventurous, Bashar lacks these qualities. Second, this was expressed in a series of declarations Bashar made in which he threatened that in the event Syria is attacked by Israel it would exploit its capabilities to an extent that would cause severe damage to Israel.(26)

For years, the Syrian WMD program aroused little attention in the world. However, the change in U.S. policy since September 11, 2001, and even more strongly since the 2003 war in Iraq, means that the Syrians may no longer be able to pursue this policy. It indeed would appear that U.S. policy regarding Syria is no longer determined by the Israeli-Syrian conflict as it was in the past but rather in a belief that American

national security interests requires action against any regime involved in terrorism and developing non-conventional weapons. Syria fits these categories from Washington's viewpoint, thus ensuring continued strong American pressure on Syria.

The pressure put on Damascus increased significantly following the dramatic decision made by Muammar Qadhafi to give up his plans to develop WMD in Libya. Furthermore, for the first time the European Union started to put pressure on Syria to change its policy on this issue and to give up its plans to develop weapons of mass destruction. Following the occupation of Iraq, the Syrians were met with new European demands that the association agreement they were eager to sign with the EU would include an article calling for the disarmament of all countries, including Syria, of weapons of mass destruction. The Syrians rejected this demand.(27)

How the United States will act toward Syria depends on many factors, including who is elected president of the United States in November 2004, the situation in Iraq, and the reading of the experience in Iraq for future strategy. The Syrian policy, aiming at preserving its strength by equipping the army with advanced WMD capabilities, might thus become a threat in itself to Syrian security. Bashar's behavior, which sometimes seemed as if he was seeking a confrontation with the United States--taking steps his father would never have risked--heightens the possibility that its emphasis on WMD might become a major problem for the regime.

The presence of such a young and inexperienced leader who seems to lack the same degree of legitimacy, public support, and respect which his late father enjoyed, may be inconsequential in a country that benefits from political stability and long-standing democratic traditions. But Syria is a country suffering from severe social and economic problems that require

immediate and unequivocal solutions. More important, Syria plays a crucial regional role, and may even decide the fate of the region—for better or worse, for peace or war. The vacuum created at the top of the ruling pyramid in Damascus presents problems, not just for Syria, but the region as a whole.

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NOTES

1. For Bush's statements see CNN, April 14, 2003; See also Eyal Zisser, "Syria and the War in Iraq," Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA) Journal, Vol. 7, No. 2 (June 2003), pp. 5-18; "Syria and the United States: Bad Habits Die Hard," Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Summer 2003), pp. 29-38.
2. See, for example, Bashar's interviews to the Daily Telegraph, January 6, 2004; and to al-Jazira TV Channel, May 1, 2004. See also Yediot Ahronot (Tel Aviv), December 28, 2002; Israeli TV, Channel 1, September 19, 2003.
3. See AFP (Agence France Presse) (Paris), February 13, 2003; see also al-Safir (Beirut), February 12, 2003.
4. LNA (Lebanese News Agency), May 14, 2004.
5. For more see Patrick Seale, Asad of Syria: the Struggle for the Middle East (London: I. B. Tauris, 1988), pp. 250-393; Eyal Zisser, Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition (New York: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 8-13.
6. See Amos Gilboa, "The National Security Doctrine," in Avner Yaniv, Moshe Ma'oz and Avi Kover (eds.) Syria and Israeli Security (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ma'arachot, 1990), pp. 143-154; Ze'ev Eytan, "The Syrian Army," in Avner Yaniv, Moshe Ma'oz and Avi Kover (eds.) Syria and Israel Security (Hebrew), pp. 155-170. See also Zisser, Asad's Legacy, pp. 38-39.
7. See Zisser, Asad's Legacy, pp. 39-51.
8. For more see Shimon Aronson, Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East (Jerusalem: Akadamon, 1995) (in Hebrew), pp. 171-173.
9. See Zisser, Asad's Legacy, pp. 62-65.
10. See Dany Shoham, "Poisoned Missiles," Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 13-22.
11. See Yediot Ahronot, September 15, 2002.
12. Al-Safir (Beirut), February 17, 2002; al-Watan (Kuwait), July 23, 2002.
13. See Eyal Zisser, "Does Bashar al-Assad Rule Syria" Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter 2003), pp. 3-15; Fascies of Syria (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 2003) (in Hebrew), pp. 231-232.
14. See Daniel Sobelman, New Rules of the Game: Israel and Hizballah after the Withdrawal from Lebanon (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2003).
15. See Ze'ev Eytan, "The Syrian Army;" Shoham, "Poisoned Missiles."
16. Ibid.
17. See Shai Feldman and Yiftah Shapir (eds.) The Middle East Military Balance, 2000-2001 (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2003), pp. 289-301.
18. Ibid., p. 291; see also Eyal Zisser, In the Name of the Father: Bashar's First Years in Power (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2004), pp. 232-234.
19. Shoham, "Poisoned Missiles."

20. See Shai Feldman and Yiftah Shapir (eds.) The Middle East Military Balance, 2000-2001, pp. 289-301; Zisser, Faces of Syria, pp. 231-232.
21. See Mustafa Talas, "Biological Warfare, a New and Effective Method in Modern Warfare," Tehran SAFF, FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service), April 20, 2000; pp. 38-42; see also Anthony H. Cordesman, "Syria and Weapons of Mass Destruction," Washington D. C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2000), pp. 22-28; Shoham, "Poisoned Missiles: Syria's Domsday Deterrent," p. 18.
22. Eyal Zisser, "The Return of Hizbulla," Middle East Quarterly, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Fall 2002), pp. 3-13.
23. Ma'ariv (Tel Aviv, September 14, 2003; Sobelman, New Rules of the Game, pp. 70-71; see also Eyal Zisser, In the Name of the Father, pp. 231-232, 271-273.
24. See al-Manar TV, June 10, 2001.
25. Zisser, In the Name of the Father, pp. 271-277.
26. See al-Safir (Beirut), February 27, 2002.
27. See al-Hayat (London), March 3, 2004; al-Watan (Kuwait), April 5, 2004; Reuters, May 7, 14, 2004.