

Column One: Fighting the next war

Caroline Glick , THE JERUSALEM POST

Apr. 19, 2007

Last Friday, *Haaretz's* military commentator Ze'ev Schiff accused the Barak and Sharon governments of responsibility for last summer's war. As Schiff put it, since the IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000, "a threatening system [comprised of Hizbullah, Syria and Iran] arose [on Israel's northern border], which required a preemptive strike. The aversion to conducting such a strike eventually caused the war."

Schiff's analysis is correct. But since it stops short of drawing lessons for the present dangers, it is largely useless. Today, due to the Olmert-Livni-Peretz government's failure in the last war, we stand at the brink of the next one. And in the next war, the main enemy will be Syria, which will fight in coordination with Hizbullah and the Palestinians and under Iranian guidance.

Syria has been openly preparing for war since the last summer. And in the space of the past week alone, the Syrians twice announced their intention to attack Israel. On Monday, Syria's Propaganda Minister Moshen Bilal threatened that if Israel doesn't fully implement the Arab plan which calls for its retreat to the 1949 armistice lines and acceptance of millions of Arab immigrants, Syria will go to war. On Wednesday, Syrian dictator Bashar Assad said, "We always prepare ourselves. Israel is a fierce enemy. We have seen nothing from it but harm."

A constructive Israeli policy for contending with Syria must be based on a clear understanding of both Syria's interests and our own.

First there are Syria's war preparations. Many note optimistically that Syria has not moved its tanks to the border. But why would it?

Syria has no intention of fighting a conventional war against Israel. The war that Syria is planning will bear greater similarity to the insurgency in Iraq and Hizbullah's war last summer than to Syria's previous wars with Israel.

In the midst of last summer's war, Assad announced the formation of a new terror force tasked with infiltrating and attacking targets on the Golan Heights. The Syrian order of battle also includes a highly trained commando division; a massive artillery force capable of wreaking destruction on the Golan Heights and the Galilee; Scud ballistic missiles with ranges covering all of Israel; and chemical warheads that can be fitted on the Scuds.

This week CBN broadcast satellite footage of three hardened Syrian missile facilities outside of Homs and Hama. Syria aims to bleed Israel in order to force subsequent Israeli political concessions.

Syria has good reasons to go to war with Israel. Its forced departure from Lebanon in 2005 humiliated and weakened the regime both politically and economically. The regime views an achievement on the Golan Heights as a way to make up for the shame.

Moreover, Hizbullah's achievements in last summer's war challenge Syria to demonstrate that it too can humiliate Israel. It is also notable that June 11 will mark the fortieth anniversary of Israel's liberation of the Golan Heights.

Rather than contend with the Syrian challenge, the Olmert-Livni-Peretz government has opted to ignore it. In his appearance before the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on Wednesday, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said, "We have no intention of attacking Syria."

He added, "The assessment of all of Israel's assessment bodies is that Syria is deploying defensively in line with a scenario of an attack against them. But we are also preparing for a situation where we are surprised."

The gist of Olmert's statements is that he is unwilling to decide how to deal with the Syrian threat. He would rather be "surprised" by the Syrians than prevent surprises by crafting an Israeli policy that would defend Israel's interests and preempt Syrian aggression.

The Israeli Left maintains that the only way to prevent war is by holding peace talks with Syria that will lead to an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. But former national security adviser Maj. Gen. (ret.) Giora Eiland explained in a recent lecture at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs that under current conditions, in contrast to the Left's protestations, an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, even in return for a peace treaty, would increase the chance of war with Syria, and decrease Israel's chances of winning the war. Syria would have little reason to abide by the agreement after an Israeli withdrawal and Israel would lack international support to enforce the agreement after Syria breached it.

Rather than preemptively surrendering, Israel's strategic aims should be to degrade Syria's capacity to harm it and to change the Syrian regime's assessment of the attractiveness of attacking Israel.

Any plan to reduce Syria's capacity for aggression against Israel should properly begin with Schiff's analysis of last summer's war in Lebanon. Given the nature of the gathering threat, it makes sense to consider a preemptive strike on Syria's terror training camps, its missile sites and artillery bases. Such a strike should be guided by the lessons from the last war regarding the limitations of air power. Air strikes had limited results against hardened targets and they exposed Israel's flank to anti-Israel propagandists in the media war.

Changing Syria's cost-benefit analysis of war with Israel involves going beyond the military realm. To impact Syria's decision-making loop, Israel must also consider the economic and political realities facing the Assad regime.

Syria is an economic basket case. In a study of the Syrian economy published this week, the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) noted that since the US-led invasion of Iraq, some one million Iraqis have fled to Syria. Rather than stimulate economic growth, due to the corruption and economic incompetence of the regime, the population inflow has simply caused massive inflation. Aside from this, Syria's oil revenues are steadily declining. US and EU economic sanctions instituted in recent years have made it impossible for Syria to receive financial credits or significantly expand its international trade. Today the regime can barely provide basic services to the population.

Syria's economic weakness undermines the regime's political stability. Another factor undermining that stability is the restive Kurdish minority in northeast Syria. The Kurds, who comprise twenty percent of Syria's overall population, already staged an uprising against the regime in May 2004.

Today, Syria's Kurds are inspired by their brethren in Iraq to work to achieve their rights. Like the Iraqi Kurds,

the Syrian Kurds, who have good relations with their Arab compatriots, do not demand independence. Rather they seek to transform Syria from a centralized totalitarian state into a federated democracy.

Two weeks ago a conference of Iraqi, Syrian, Turkish and Iranian Kurds took place in Irbil, Iraq. Massoud Barzani, the President of Iraqi Kurdistan, spelled out the Kurdish view of Israel in an interview with *Al Arabiya*.

In his words, "If [Iraq] establish[es] relations [with Israel] we will do so publicly. There is no reason for these relations to be kept secret, because we are neither afraid nor ashamed of such relations."

Barzani attacked the Iranians, Hizbullah and Palestinians for supporting Israel's destruction, explaining, "I am against driving Israel into the sea.... This policy is wrong, illogical, and unreasonable. Why annihilate a people?"

Sherkoh Abbas, who heads the Kurdistan National Assembly of Syria from his home in the US, participated in the conference. In a recent conversation he explained, "Most Syrian Kurds...have views similar to President Barzani. As Kurds we can say that we have no issues with Israel; in fact we are against the desire of the Ba'ath party, the Muslim Brotherhood or terrorists to destroy Israel..."

"The Kurds did not suffer by the hands of Israelis or Jews. All or most of their sufferings were caused by Arabs, Persians and Turks. In Syria, the Ba'ath regime Arabized the Kurdish region, stripped 300,000 Kurds of Syrian citizenship, and killed many Kurds..... We do not want to fight for the Syrian regime."

The Kurds' desire to replace the current regime with a democratic federal government is backed by the Syrian Reform Party, an exile group with strong ties to the population in Syria. Farid Ghadry, a Washington-based Syrian exile who heads the party, believes that the Kurdish federal plan is the best way to bring freedom to Syria.

The interests of the Kurds and the other regime opponents align with Israel's interests in many ways. First, Israel will benefit greatly if they achieve their aim of democratizing Syria and protecting minority rights by decentralizing authority while maintaining the territorial integrity of the country.

Centralized governments throughout the Arab world are the primary fulminators of Arab hatred of Israel. These regimes require a constant drumbeat of incitement against Israel to deflect their people's attention from their failure to provide basic services. Decentralized governments would have difficulty blaming the Jews for their failures.

There is widespread fear in Israel that if Assad's regime is overthrown, it will be replaced by the Muslim Brotherhood. This makes sense given that for the past 30 years, the Ba'athists ensured that the Muslim Brotherhood is the only other force in the country with organizational and financial means. But even so, strengthening the Kurds - who oppose jihad - will counterbalance the Muslim Brotherhood, whether or not the regime falls.

Turkey, too, fears Kurdish separatism. But Israeli support for the advancement of legitimate Syrian Kurdish rights through the cultivation of democratic federalism rather than secession, should not concern Ankara.

One of the reasons the Olmert-Livni-Peretz government is taking the Arab "peace plan" seriously in spite of the fact that it is inherently hostile to Israel is because the government is desperate to find allies against the Iran-Syria-Hizbullah axis. The trouble with this gambit is that the Sunni countries involved in the initiative act

as the Iranian-Syrian-Lebanese-Palestinian axis's support network against Israel. The Saudis and their colleagues have no interest in helping Israel.

In contrast, the Kurds are natural allies for Israel with overlapping interests and values. They would be happy to receive Israeli media and financial support. And, if at the same time as Israel helped broadcast Kurdish language television and radio into Syria, it also provided the Kurds with arms to defend themselves against Syrian aggression, the move could potentially alter Syria's cost-benefit analysis of war with Israel.

Even if the Syrians open hostilities, arming the Kurds would likely muddy the waters in a manner that would cause serious harm to Syria's war-making capacity. How well would Syria contend with the IDF if it were simultaneously trying to put down a popular rebellion? And how long would the regime survive in the aftermath of such a war?

Studying past wars is always worthwhile. But today we must prepare for the next one.

There is an Israeli strategy for victory. If we conduct a military strike that degrades Syria's ability to harm us while economically weakening the regime still further and politically supporting an oppressed, large, pro-Israel minority, perhaps we could avert war altogether.

At the very least, if war comes, we would win.

A blue banner for Sportingbet. On the left, there is a glowing football. The text "sportingbet." is in white and red, with "Sports • Casino • Poker • Games" in smaller white text below it. In the center, it says "Free \$50 Bet for new Canadian customers" in white. On the right, there is a red button with "Bet Now" in white. The word "WARNI" is partially visible in white on the far right.

WARNI

sportingbet.
Sports • Casino • Poker • Games

Free \$50 Bet for new Canadian customers

Bet Now

This article can also be read at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1176152838812&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

[[Back to the Article](#)]

Copyright 1995- 2007 The Jerusalem Post - <http://www.jpost.com/>