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No Voice Louder than the Cry of Battle

By Andrew Tabler

AUGUST 2006

DAMASCUS, Syria – The late Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser is famous internationally for turning his country's military defeat into a "diplomatic victory" over Israel, Britain and France in the 1956 Suez crisis and defiantly shifting Egypt into the Soviet camp during the Cold War. In the Arab World, Nasser is better known for his subsequent embrace of authoritarian socialism and its export through the Pan-Arab revolution across the region. The domestic political reforms Nasser and his "Free Officers" promised when they seized power in 1952 were postponed until Arab "dignity" was restored by Israel's defeat. The policy, which dramatically ended when Israel routed the Arabs in the Six Day War of June 1967, was encapsulated in the slogan "No voice louder than the cry of battle."

Fifty years later, history seems to be repeating itself, this time in Syria. High civilian casualties from Israeli air raids in this summer's Hezbollah-Israeli war were a public relations disaster for Washington, which openly delayed UN ceasefire talks to give Israel more time to pound Hezbollah into submission before a "sustainable peace" could be put in place.

When the war ended after 33 days with neither side the victor nor the vanquished, the eyes of diplomats quickly turned to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a possible party who could rein in Hezbollah. Mysteriously quiet during the war, Assad finally seemed to be on the same political page with his people. Young Syrians donned yellow Hezbollah T-shirts *en masse* and car and shop windows were plastered with banners featuring Assad, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The state waved visa and customs restrictions on the Lebanese-Syrian frontier to accommodate hundreds of thousands of refugees, which were largely fed and sheltered by Syria's private sector.

Picking up on such signs, U.S. State Department officials reportedly drew up a plan that aimed to drive a "wedge" between Syria and Iran (see AJT-13). High-ranking European officials showed up in Damascus for the first time since the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafik al-Hariri in February 2005. A number of articles in the Western press tried to persuade the Bush Administration, unsuccessfully, to engage Syria to help disarm Hezbollah.

When Assad finally spoke on August 15, it was clear that he is going his own radical way. Assad predictably praised the resistance and accused Washington and Israel of planning in advance its massive response to Hezbollah's abduction of two Israeli soldiers on July 12. Assad unexpectedly accused European countries of being involved in



President Bashar al-Assad's hard-line speech of August 15 following this summer's Israeli-Hezbollah War indicates Damascus is closing the door on Western cooperation and embracing Iran instead.

a U.S.-Israeli “conspiracy” against Syria, and branded Arab leaders “half-men” with “half-positions” concerning support for “the resistance.” Assad warned Western embassies in Damascus not to meddle in Syria’s internal affairs — an admonition that could be the veritable death knell of the country’s Western-funded and designed reform efforts. Like Nasser after Suez, Assad is pushing his country into the arms of America’s archenemy, this time the nuclear-hungry Islamic Republic of Iran. The question remains, however, just how many Syrians are ready for Tehran’s embrace.

Political Awakening

Nearly 50 years of authoritarian rule have put most Syrians to sleep politically. On the morning of July 12, for example, few Syrians had any idea that the country’s main exiled opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, announced it was setting up a “transitional government” to prevent anarchy in the event of the Assad regime’s collapse.

When Israel unleashed a massive bombing campaign in Lebanon later that same day in response to the abduction of two of its soldiers by Hezbollah, people across the Syrian capital crowded around television sets and tuned in their radios to get the latest news. On July 15, Al-Jazeera television reported that Israel had bombed a Syrian military installation near the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. It finally started to sink in that Syria’s old enemy was approaching the gates.

“Did you see the report?” a friend asked me as soon as I answered her call on my mobile telephone. I could sense from the tone of her voice she was panicking. “Do you think they will hit us as well?” she asked.

I didn’t know what to say. Syrians and Lebanese are socially and economically joined at the hip, but following the forced withdrawal of the Syrian Army from Lebanon in April 2005, formal political relations are more distinct than at any time in the last 30 years. When it comes to a Hezbollah attack on Israel, however, it all comes down to what Israel reads to be the return address. Given Hezbollah’s strong support from Damascus and Tehran, it was anyone’s guess who Israel would hold responsible, and when.

It wasn’t clear Assad knew the answer either. Syria’s state-dominated media reported the Israeli attacks without official comment for the first two days, instead using statements of Russian President Vladimir Putin and random Italian communist party officials condemning the violence. On July 15, Syrian Information Minister Mohsen Bilal responded to the border strike with a warning: “Any Israeli aggression against Syria will be met with a firm and direct response whose timing and methods are unlimited,” Bilal said. Iran quickly backed Syria up, warning Israel of “unimaginable losses” if it struck Syria. Tehran added that it was only offering “spiritual and

humanitarian” support to Hezbollah. The Iranian regime denied, like Syria, that Tehran supplied Hezbollah with weapons.

U.S. President George W. Bush thought otherwise. On July 17, as Putin openly teased Bush about Washington’s “democracy agenda” at that week’s G-8 Summit in Moscow, a microphone inadvertently left on recorded a muffled and candid conversation between Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair that would shed light on Washington’s idea of how to end the crisis. “What they need to do is to get Syria to get Hezbollah to stop doing this shit,” Bush blurted out to Blair over the lunch table.

The question was: how? In 1979, Syria was among the founding members of Washington’s list of State Sponsors of International Terrorism. Until Sudan was added in 1993, Syria was also the only member of the list with which the US had diplomatic relations. U.S. law has restricted economic assistance, as well as the sale of “dual use” items, to Syria for over 37 years. Washington keeps an embassy in Damascus primarily for one reason: Syria’s strong influence in Lebanon. On February 15, 2005, the day after former Lebanese Premier Rafik al Hariri was assassinated, US Ambassador to Syria Margret Scobey marched over to the office of Syria’s then-foreign minister and now vice president Farouq as-Shara and announced she was going home. America’s chief representative in Damascus was then Deputy Chief of Mission Steve Seche, whose tour of duty was scheduled to end on July 31. As journalists in the West tried to transcribe the candid Bush-Blair lunch exchange, the US embassy in Damascus held Steve’s going away party around 6 p.m.

When I arrived at the U.S. Ambassador’s residence — the recent remodeling of which was a bit ironic given historically low relations between Damascus and Washington — Steve greeted me at the garden’s entrance along with Bill Roebuck, the embassy’s political officer. After about five minutes of discussion, arms-folded, looking down at the ground, I said how, despite hard-line rhetoric, I thought I heard some conciliatory gestures in Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah’s TV address, as well as in Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s hard-line speech from earlier in the day. Perhaps the situation would calm down soon, I said.

“Are you kidding?” Seche said. “WE wrote that hard-line speech!” And with that, he turned away to greet the garden’s next visitor. Steve’s message toed the diplomatic line on U.S. support for Israel. But there was something about the way he spoke that told me something big was up, and that he wasn’t totally happy about it.

Proxy War

That something turned out to be a proxy war in Lebanon between the United States and its regional nemesis, the nuclear-hungry Islamic Republic of Iran. From the first days of the war, small stories, reported how Israeli

generals had, before the war, briefed U.S. officials about a military response to an expected Hezbollah attempt to capture of an Israeli soldier. Such expectations didn't come from nowhere: Hezbollah had attempted to capture two Israeli soldiers last January. Hamas, the Islamic resistance organization cum parliamentary majority in the Palestinian Authority, successfully captured an Israeli soldier in June, leading to a massive Israeli military response. So when Hezbollah used a tunnel under the "blue line" — the ceasefire line of 1949 that demarcates the southern border of Lebanon — to kill four Israeli soldiers and abduct two others on July 12, it was no surprise Israel struck back.

Unexpected was Hezbollah's ability to fight back. A week after the bombardment began, including strikes on civilian targets that Israel claims Hezbollah was using as de facto "human shields," diplomats attending the garden party were surprised that Hezbollah continued to fire hundreds of rockets into northern Israel every day. Syrians seemed surprised as well, but pleasantly so. Day by day more Hezbollah flags appeared across the Syrian capital, and young people lined up at shops to buy yellow Nasrallah T-shirts. Homemade decals I noticed as early as last April showing busts of Assad, Nasrallah and Ahmadinejad arranged together suddenly appeared on professionally printed posters in shop windows.

The Syrian media's pro-Hezbollah propaganda campaign made it hard to determine the depth of popular support for "the resistance." State-owned Syrian television's morning and evening news programs — the only two most Syrians now watch (besides soap operas) in an era of pan-Arab TV satellite stations — led in with video footage of women and children being pulled from the rubble in Lebanon. Marching music played in the background, complete with war drums. The ruckus suddenly stopped, only to be followed by an audio recording of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's statement of July 21 that the war in Lebanon was part of the "birth pangs of a new Middle East." The linkage between Washington's democracy agenda, Israel and death and destruction was clear. Rice's dictum was repeated every day on Syrian television for weeks, which many Syrians parroted back to me with the addendum "a new Sykes-Picot" — the secret 1916 agreement between Britain and France that led to the division of the then-Ottoman empire into the Arab states we know today.

Better the Devil You Know

The question remained if Syrians would buy into the state's version of "the plot." After six years of Syria's "reform process," most Syrians are unhappy with the way they are ruled. A host of European countries stepped forward to support Bashar al-Assad when he assumed the presidency in July 2000 following the death of his father, Hafez. The primary reason for engaging the son was political: Syria bordered Israel, controlled Lebanon, and Hafez al-Assad had nearly signed a peace agreement

with Israel only three months before his death. The secondary, but related reason was to reform one of the most corrupt and authoritarian systems in the Arab World, to bring it into a Western orbit, and to arrange for a smooth transition toward democracy. Overly centralized decision making, combined with Syria's continued socialist ideals a decade after the Soviet Union's collapse, has weighed heavily on Syrians. Their innate Levantine entrepreneurial spirit ensured the private sector survived, however distorted it may be by triple bookkeeping and a system of bribes that substitutes for taxation.

Europeans have made some headway in spurring economic reform, but political reform has stalled. A brief opening after Bashar took power, dubbed the "Damascus Spring," saw a flowering of "discussion forums" that tackled Syria's myriad of political, economic and social problems. A year later, the state rounded up opponents, imprisoned some and has kept a tight lid on Syria's small, disorganized opposition ever since.

When the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003, in the name of ridding it of weapons of mass destruction, images of American tanks pulling down Iraq's orchard of Saddam Hussein statues spoke a million words in Syria. Many speculated that similar effigies of Hafez al-Assad throughout Syria and Lebanon would soon come tumbling down as well. Almost six months to the day after Baghdad fell, Israel bombed a Palestinian training camp at Ain as-Saheb outside Damascus in response to an Islamic Jihad terrorist attack in Haifa a few days earlier. President Bush said Israel was justified to bomb the camp because Damascus continued to host the offices of Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian militant groups. He also announced he no longer opposed U.S. congressional sanctions against Syria awaiting his signature. Since European "positive pressure" had failed to change the way the Assad regime did business, perhaps some "negative pressures" — sanctions and verbal threats — would bring Damascus around.

The Bush Administration implemented the sanctions in May 2004, but the president's selection of a ban on U.S. exports and already non-existent flights between the U.S. and Syria did little to shake the regime. Assad responded by using Syrian influence in Lebanon to extend the term of Lebanese President Emile Lahoud in September 2004. Washington and Paris countered with Security Council Resolution 1559, which demanded the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the disarmament of Hezbollah. After Hariri was killed the following February, Syria withdrew its troops three months later. Negative pressures, particularly concerning the investigation into Hariri's murder, seemed to be working, at least in Lebanon.

They also worked in Syria, but in different ways. The day after Hariri was killed, civil society activists in Syria began organizing with exiled opposition groups, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood. Opposition parties ral-

lied around the “Damascus Declaration” — a manifesto for democratic change in Syria. Its announcement was delayed due to state pressure, as well as a promises of a “great leap forward” in reform at the June 2005 Ba’ath Party Conference. When vague promises of a new parties’ law fell well short of expectations, work continued on the declaration, leading to its announcement only a few days before the first results of the Hariri investigation were announced on October 19. The Declaration’s leaders might have not been working directly with Washington, but they were certainly working in concert with the diplomatic pressures bearing down on Damascus. (See AJT-10)

After skillfully rebuffing the Syrian opposition’s moves to seek democratic reforms during the height of diplomatic demands resulting from the Hariri investigation, the regime began cracking down on opposition activists following the “defection” to the opposition of former Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam on December 31. Some say the regime feared Khaddam’s contacts in the country and ability to stir up trouble. Others say the regime regained its authoritarian confidence when it realized that the democracy agenda was on the back burner in Washington following the Muslim Brotherhood’s impressive showing in last autumn’s Egyptian parliamentary elections, Hamas’ routing of Fatah in January’s Palestinian polls, and Hezbollah’s ability to remain a part of the Lebanese government.

Chaos Theory

What held the Syrian people back last autumn from rioting in the streets and demanding the downfall of the Damascus regime at perhaps its weakest point in the last 40 years? Fear of arrest by the security services for sure, but also serious doubts over Washington’s intentions for a post-Assad Syria. The Hariri investigation coincided with a rapid increase in bloodshed in neighboring Iraq. If television news footage of the slaughter of civilians were not enough to raise questions in Syrians’ minds about Bush’s agenda, they were reinforced by waves of Iraqi refugees flooding into Syria. Some brought suitcases full of money, but most did not. The Syrian government offered Iraqis basic services, but budgets ran out earlier this year. Charities and international relief agencies are now trying to fill the gap.

The “chaos” raging next door in Iraq was no accident Syrians told me again and again. They said it was part of an Israeli-inspired plan, forged with neo-conservatives prominent in the Bush Administration, to smash Arab societies through military action, create sectarian strife, and cause civil war. While I argued back that the Levant was full of crazy conspiracy theories, Syrians would reply, “do you think what is happening in Iraq for the past three years is just a mistake? No, its policy.”

The Syrian regime has exploited the Iraq fiasco by issuing daily statements attributing the region’s problems to the “Zionist-American” conspiracy, and has implicated

much of the Syrian opposition in a wave of arrests earlier this year following the signing of another opposition manifesto, the Beirut-Damascus Declaration. The regime is also making Washington’s worst nightmare come true by letting the Islamic genie out of Syria’s secular bottle. The permitted burning of the Danish Embassy in Damascus in response to caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed published in a Danish newspaper (see AJT-9), along with news reports of radical “takfiri” Islamic groups carrying out operations in Syria (with American weapons) have fitted in nicely with the regime’s newly-strengthened alliance with Iran. So when Hezbollah and Israel go to war, it’s a perfect regime safety valve for releasing popular aggression toward its enemies. Hezbollah is a Shiite Islamic movement, so Syria’s majority Sunni population, and its supporters in the Muslim Brotherhood, cannot control it. It also helps people to feel they are fighting the Western powers that support Israel and oversee the carnage in Iraq. Last but not least, because the Israeli and American threat to Syria turned to violence in Lebanon, it allows the regime to put off reform until the “enemy” is defeated and “dignity” restored.

Battle for Hearts and Minds

The first government-organized demonstration for “the resistance” on July 17 indicated that popular support for Hezbollah was lukewarm. When I called Syrian friends and journalists that morning to ask if we were going to the rally, most were still in bed shortly before it kicked off at 10 a.m. Only a few thousand state workers who were given two hours leave attended. The giant television camera booms I had first seen at the pro-Syrian counter demonstrations in Damascus in March 2005 (see AJT-2) were back in action. TV cameras used close-up images of the crowd to exaggerate its true size. This scene was repeated at multiple Damascus rallies over the next week.

The demonstration was so uninspiring that a group of journalist colleagues and I decided to visit the nearby Rouda Café — an opposition hangout adjacent to parliament. As they sucked down cups of strong tea to wake up, a Syrian colleague leaned over the table and whispered in my ear to look behind me. Sitting only three feet away was Houssam Taher Houssam, the 30-year-old-something witness cited in the first report of the Hariri investigation who recanted his testimony against the Syrian regime last November. There was a brief but comical moment of excitement when I snapped a photo of Houssam stealthily over my shoulder. The café’s patrons were extremely laid back, seemingly unconcerned about the war raging next door.

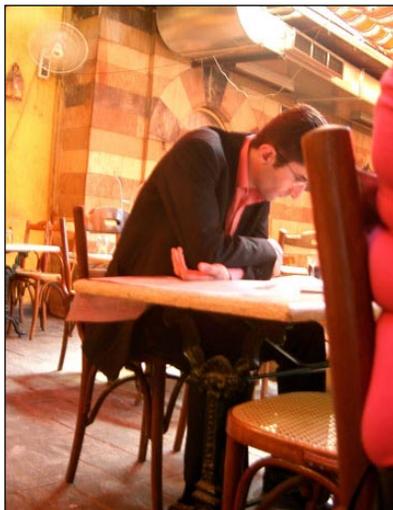
As civilian casualties increased, Syrians got behind the resistance. For months, I noticed my friends’ cell phones had ringtones featuring excerpts from Nasrallah’s speeches. Some even bothered to play longer clips for me, which they traded among friends. As the war dragged on, my Syrian friends began including me in mass emails



Early government-organized rallies indicated popular support for the resistance was lukewarm.

showing photos of dead women and children being pulled from bombed-out buildings in Lebanon and in the occupied territories. Some were even arranged into PowerPoint presentations. They were badly made, most notably with photo captions that had horrible English and Arabic spelling and grammar mistakes. They were genuine expressions of popular concerns, however, and were a far cry from the state's clumsy propaganda.

Such sentiments grew after Lebanese refugees began



A candid photograph of Houssam Taher, the infamous Syrian witness in the Hariri investigation who recanted his damning testimony against the regime on Syrian TV last November.

flooding into Syria in the war's second week.

"See, like Iraqis," my colleague Obaida Hamad said to me as our car approached the swarm of Lebanese cars piling across the Syrian border crossing at Jdaida. Iraqis continued to stream into Syria from Iraq every day too. The fact that Obaida, who is far from a regime parrot, made the connection helped me realize popular sentiments and the regime's line were quickly merging.

This notion was reinforced by the genuine hospitality extended to the Lebanese refugees upon arrival by Syrian society. While semi-official organizations like the Syrian-Arab Red Crescent passed out water and food, it was the private sector that delivered truckloads of supplies. A phone booth set up by the mobile phone provider Syriatel, owned by President Assad's cousin Rami Makhoulouf, offered free calls to anywhere in Syria and Lebanon. As Lebanese waited to pass immigration procedures, young activists from the Lawyers Syndicate and the Syrian Public Relations Organization (led by Nizar Mahyoub, the Ministry of Information official responsible for foreign journalists) canvassed arriving cars and trucks, asking passengers if they had a place to stay in Damascus. Those in need of food and shelter were put in touch with Syrian families who had placed their names with the canvassers. "We have so many names!" one canvasser in a pink



Syria's vibrant private sector spearheaded the relief response for hundreds of thousands of Lebanese refugees who flooded into Syria during the war.

baseball cap told me, pointing to a clipboard stuffed with papers in her hand.

All in all, over 230,000 Lebanese refugees found shelter in Syria. Around 80 percent of those were housed in private Syrian homes. In many cases, sons moved back in with parents to make room for the war's displaced. As I walked among the throng of vehicles making their way into Syria, I imagined the soft power of Syrians' generosity. I also sadly realized that the United States — the world's superpower and the champion of globalization — had absolutely nothing to offer as a counterweight.

"Assad is sitting pretty now," a friend said to me later that evening. If a regime's legitimacy doesn't come from its people, the next best way to obtain it is by a response to an external threat. High civilian casualties seemed to be helping the regime's case, even among the opposition.

"We denounce the Israeli aggression against Lebanese civilians," Hassan Abdul Azim, the secretary-general of the opposition Democratic Arab Socialist Unity Party and a leader of the Damascus Declaration, told us a few days later. "Israel cannot attack Lebanon without an approval and support from the United States. We call on the Syrian leadership to strengthen the national unity through more opening to the Syrian opposition to make Syria stronger to face the Israeli threats."

Misha'al Tummo, the Secretary General of the Kurd-

ish Future Party, said they drew the line at violence against civilians as well.

"We as a Kurdish people condemn all kinds of aggression and violence against the Lebanese civilians," Tummo said. "We sympathize with Lebanese because our people (Kurds) face the massacres and killing civilians. The war in Lebanon is a regional war between Syrian, Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah front and the Unites States, Israel and some Arab states which follow the American orders. The war aims to change the game rules in the Middle East."

Even Riad al-Turk, one of Syria's most outspoken opposition leaders, toed the nationalist line ever so critically.

"Lebanon is a yard for the world to fight in," Turk said. "Lebanon is a part of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Israel and the US used the capturing of two Israeli soldiers as a pretext to wage a war against Lebanon. The Syrian stance to open the border to Lebanese civilians and humanitarian aid is acceptable. Syria should support the Lebanese by using its army. In this regard, the Syrian official stance is very weak."

A Window of Opportunity

With civilian casualties skyrocketing and Hezbollah showing no signs of surrendering, some high-profile Americans with regional experience began talking about the need for the Bush Administration to engage Syria. From the early days of the war, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman argued that if Washington was interested in ending the bloodshed, it had "a lot to discuss with Syria." He made a whistle stop tour through Israel, Jordan and Syria about ten days into the conflict to test his theory. The writer Lee Smith, a good friend and then one of three American "refugees" from Beirut staying in my apartment, arranged a meeting with Friedman upon his arrival in Damascus.

I knew Friedman was there to see Assad. "To name something is to own it," he told me, which I wasn't sure pertained to his idea of engaging Assad or his new idea of "patriotic environmentalism." Friedman said he had already been to see Syrian Minister of Expatriates Bouthaina Shaaban, the former translator for Hafez al-Assad and a member of Assad's Alawite sect. When he asked me who else to meet, I immediately called the handler of Deputy Premier Abdullah Dardari, Syria's primary reformer. My contact told me he would call back that evening with an answer. The reply came two minutes later. Dardari would see Friedman the following night at 10 p.m. before he left for the airport.

Friedman didn't get to see Assad. So Lee and I organized a dinner the following night on the rooftop terrace of a restaurant in Damascus' Old City to introduce Friedman to *Syria Today* owner Kinda Kanbar and staff members Obaida Hamad and Dalia Haidar. Dalia's brother Ziad,

correspondent for Al-Arabiyya Television and *As-Safir* newspaper, and *Al-Hayat* newspaper's Ibrahim Hamidi joined us as well. After a half hour or so of pleasantries, the Syrians crowded around Friedman, whose notebook computer is always open and on the table. Friedman is a popular columnist and a great writer largely because he is an excellent listener. His down to earth, friendly nature helps people open up to him, and that night was no exception. Some at the table railed against Israel, others praised Hezbollah and talked of the pride they felt from the militia's resilience. Obaida, always the oddball, talked about how the resistance issue got in the way of other important domestic issues, like reform and democracy.

I wish I had had my camera that evening, because that meeting turned out to be the closest thing to American-Syrian reconciliation during the 33-day conflict. As I escorted Friedman over to Dardari's office a little later, his handler called me on my mobile. "The minister has been called away to an emergency meeting," he said. My watch said 9:45 p.m., far too late for a cabinet session. "You know they are very busy these days."

What Friedman and I didn't know was that a State Department plan, leaked a few days earlier in the *New York Times*, which sought to drive a "wedge" between Syria and Iran, was already floundering. According to another Times report a few weeks later, Secretary of State Rice sent Steve Seche over to see Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem around the time of Friedman's visit to see if Syria was willing to negotiate. While the meeting took place, the report said that Moualem "gave no indication that [the Syrian regime] would be moderately constructive." No other overtures have taken place since.

Nevertheless, Friedman's column, which quoted

extensively from our rooftop dinner, turned out to be the first of many articles that tried, unsuccessfully, to convince the Bush Administration to engage Syria in one way or another. (Friedman spoke about the dinner on NPR and Meet the Press the following week.) In a *New York Times* op-ed on August 5, I advocated allowing the U.S. private sector to get more involved in Syria as the "thin end of the wedge" (see AJT-13).

So with Washington defying Damascus and Tehran and vice versa, the conflict dragged on for weeks. As the United States and France argued over ceasefire texts in the Security Council, Syrians (and later Lebanese) said to me over and over that Washington was simply giving Israel more time to finish the job at the expense of more Lebanese civilian lives.

The positive pressure specialists, the Europeans, then stepped in to give diplomacy a chance. On August 3, Spanish foreign minister Miguel Angel Moratinos arrived in Damascus for talks with Assad. His arrival seemed promising, as his last trip to Damascus on February 14, 2005 — the day of Hariri's murder — marked the last time a European official had set foot in Syria. Moratinos told reporters after the meeting that Assad was willing to use his influence to rein in Hezbollah — a statement that was quickly denied by the state news agency. European newspapers reported that certain EU countries — led by Germany, the primary supporter of Syrian reform — were preparing a package of incentives for Syria to cut off arms supplies to Hezbollah. Among these "carrots" was reportedly a German-led effort to push the member countries of the European Union to sign its long-delayed "Association Agreement" with Syria. Once ratified, the agreement would lock Syria into a schedule of reform steps aimed at liberalizing trade, promoting investment and bolstering respect for human rights.

The Divine Victory

Finally on August 12 — one month to the day after the conflict began — the Security Council passed Resolution 1701, which called for a ceasefire and the deployment of an international force in south Lebanon. The ceasefire, to which Hezbollah and Israel consented, was to take effect 48 hours from the resolution's passage. In a clumsy attempt at a public relations coup de grace, Israel quickly launched its "largest airborne operation since the 1973 war" throughout south Lebanon. They were hoping to capture what would be the war's great surprise: Hezbollah's extensive network of tunnels and concrete-reinforced bunkers — some only a hundred meters from the Israeli frontier — from where daily rocket



The arrival of Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos on August 3, marked the first time a high-level Western official had set foot in Damascus since Hariri's murder. Moratinos' statement after meeting Assad, that the Syrian president would use his influence to rein in Hezbollah was denied the next day.

barrages were launched during the war. Their construction in hard limestone had gone completely undetected by Israel, the UNIFIL force in south Lebanon, and the Lebanese government. One UN commander told a friend that Hezbollah “must have been bringing the cement in by the spoonful.”

Eager to talk with Lebanese about the war, I passed through the lone crossing point from Syria to Lebanon not destroyed by Israeli bombing the minute the ceasefire took effect on the morning of August 14. The usual two-hour journey from Damascus to Beirut took a little over six due to Israeli strikes on roads and bridges. I quickly rented a car and went for a drive around Beirut, including Hezbollah headquarters in the southern neighborhood of Haret Harek.

Israel’s “precision bombing” was impressive, as Israelis were able to destroy a sole building with very little if any damage to adjacent structures. Their intelligence information on targets seemed to have fallen short, however: nearly a thousand Lebanese civilians died from Israeli strikes during the war. In the south, Israel used so many cluster bombs that unexploded ordinance has claimed the lives of almost 50 children and wounded over a hundred. Hezbollah hung huge banners off buildings in the southern suburbs to make their point. “Extremely Accurate Targets” one banner hanging in Haret Harek read adorned with a photo of a bandaged child missing a limb.

It was footnoted by the slogan, “The Divine Victory”.

That afternoon, the *New Yorker Magazine* posted an article on its website by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh citing credible sources that Washington had indeed planned Israel’s response to the Hezbollah kidnapping well in advance. The reason? To destroy Hezbollah’s ability to hit Israel during possible future U.S. preemptive strikes on Iran, which had an August 31 UN deadline to stop enriching uranium. As much of Iran’s program is literally underground, Hersh said the U.S. wanted to understand the effectiveness of its weapons in Israel’s arsenal against such targets. The report also said the Bush Administration hoped the raid would further democracy by strengthening the government of Lebanese Premier Fouad Siniora “so that it could assert its authority over the south of the country, much of which is controlled by Hezbollah.”

Slamming the Door

The next day, President Assad finally broke his silence in an address to the Syrian Journalists’ Fourth General Conference in Damascus. The fire-and-brimstone speech, which featured the word “conspiracy” scores of times, dashed hopes for peace any time soon.

“The more illusive the realization of peace becomes, the more important and necessary other ways and methods become...” Assad said. “The whole world only got inter-



Heavy damage in Beirut’s southern suburbs didn’t stop Hezbollah from responding with an immediate media campaign designed to point out Israel’s targeting of civilian areas during the war.



Assad has used high profile interviews since the war to support his regime's embrace of the "resistance," Iran, and putting reform on the back burner.

ested in the Middle East after the 1973 War.... [the West] only moves when Israel is in pain." Resistance, Assad added, "is necessary for the achievement of peace."

While Assad's pro-Hezbollah rhetoric was not unexpected, his open swipe at Europe, which supports Syrian reform efforts, was unprecedented. "The countries concerned with the peace process — and they are mostly European — are responsible for what is happening. We might wonder what motivates some officials in these countries to send messages about a sick prisoner [in a Syrian jail].... What nobility! What humanity! What greatness! We might ask as well, where are these same officials concerning the massacres perpetrated in Lebanon?"

And for his fellow Arabs leaders, Assad mixed a few words as well.

"One of the other positive sides to this war is that it has completely uncovered the Arab situation. If we asked any Arab citizen about the Arab situation before this war, they will say it is bad — which is true. Arabs used to see our situation under makeup, now they see it as it is in reality. This war prevented the use of such cosmetics as it classified positions in a clear way. There was no room for half-solutions in such a war where it unveiled half-men, or people with half-positions... *i.e.* those who were waiting to see where the scales would tip have fallen along with their positions. This is one of

the very important outcomes of this battle."

Less than an hour after Assad's speech, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier cancelled a trip to Damascus scheduled for later that day. He dubbed it a "negative contribution that is not in any way justified in view of the current challenges and opportunities in the Middle East.

One Country, One Voice

When I returned to Damascus a few days after Assad's speech, I found nearly all my Syrian friends who supported Western-oriented reforms terribly depressed and looking for ways to leave. The problem wasn't the president's strong support for Hezbollah — most Syrians agreed. Instead, it was the same pervasive feeling that has dogged Bashar's presidency from the beginning: that he simply is not a chip off the old block.

"Can you imagine what Hafez would have done with this situation!" blurted out one normally pro-Assad colleague. "I can understand being hard on the United States and Israel, but Europe and the Arabs! Hafez would have used this situation to bring Syria back in from the cold. Now we are isolated and our only ally is Tehran."

President Assad doesn't seem to have a problem with this. A few days later in an interview with Dubai TV's Hamdi Kandeel, Assad tried to mend fences with Arab

leaders, nearly all of whom now refuse to speak with the Syrian president. Assad insisted that Iran has a strong roll to play in the region.

"Iran is a country that has existed in the region for centuries," Assad said. "It is the Arabs who are absent from the political arena, whether in decision making or in shaping the region's future... If strong countries play a just and positive role, this would serve stability in the region.... Iran says it wants its nuclear project for peaceful means. There is nothing to fear from Iran."

Kandeel then asked Assad about concerns that the Islamic Republic's influence would feed an already "growing religious current" that could undermine the regime's pan-Arab ideological bedrock. The president responded he could handle it.

"Syria is a secular country, and has no problem co-operating with Iran," Assad said. "If one looks to what is happening in Iraq, it's easy to see that the Western powers, which are propagating secularism, are working to consolidate the non-religious radical current in the Arab World as well."

When Kandeel asked Assad point blank if Syria will adopt the resistance model it is now championing in the

region, Assad mapped out a Saddam Hussein-like insurgency strategy in the event of war.

"We know there is a semi-siege imposed on Syria, and we know that the U.S. backs up Israel one hundred percent," Assad said. "So we have changed the army's duties and are preparing, at least in the first phase, to defend our territory. Israel is an expansionist state, and if peace is not achieved, war is the natural future in the region.... The resistance is a public process, not a state resolution, and people may overtake their governments to carry it out."

And while Syrians are now free to resist Israel, Assad, like Nasser, was clear that political reform would remain on the back burner until the enemy is defeated and dignity restored.

"We have made steps [toward greater freedoms], and we have a vision," Assad said. "But we don't want freedoms that are exploited from the outside, which is happening... [we do not want to] enter into the framework of chaos or dependency and cheat our domestic situation. Loyalty to the country means not accepting foreign interference from any embassy.... Work continues on a new parties law, but we must have more room to accomplish it under the circumstances." □

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS
Current Fellows and their Activities

Richard D. Connerney (January 2005 - 2007) • INDIA

A lecturer in Philosophy, Asian Religions and Philosophy at Rutgers, Iona College and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Rick Connerney is spending two years as a Phillips Talbot Fellow studying and writing about the intertwining of religion, culture and politics in India, once described by former U.S. Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith as "a functioning anarchy." Rick has a B.A. and an M.A. in religion from Wheaton College and the University of Hawaii, respectively.

Kay Dilday (October 2005-2007) • FRANCE/MOROCCO

An editor for the *New York Times*' Op-Ed page for the past five years, Kay holds an M.A. in Comparative International Politics and Theory from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Tufts University, and has done graduate work at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in the Netherlands and the *Cours de Civilisation de la Sorbonne*. She has traveled in and written from Haiti and began her journalistic life as city-council reporter for *Somerville This Week*, in Somerville, MA.

Nicholas Schmidle (February 2006-2008) • PAKISTAN

Nicholas is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion and politics in Asia. He is spending two years in Pakistan writing on issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he has reported from Central Asia and Iran, and his work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and others. Nick received an M.A. in International Affairs - Regional Studies from American University in December 2005. He lives with his wife, Rikki.

Andrew J. Tabler (February 2005 - 2007) • SYRIA/LEBANON

Andrew has lived, studied and worked in the Middle East since a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Fellowship enabled him to begin Arabic-language studies and work toward a Master's degree at the American University in Cairo in 1994. Following the Master's, he held editorships with the *Middle East Times* and *Cairo Times* before moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Syria and working as a Senior Editor with the Oxford Business Group and a correspondent for the Economist Intelligence Unit. His two-year ICWA fellowship bases him in Beirut and Damascus, where he will report on Lebanese affairs and Syrian reform.

Jill Winder (July 2004 - 2006) • GERMANY

With a B.A. in politics from Whitman College in Walla Walla, WA and a Master's degree in Art Curating from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, Jill is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at Germany through the work, ideas and viewpoints of its contemporary artists. Before six months of intensive study of the German language in Berlin, she was a Thomas J. Watson Fellow looking at post-communist art practice and the cultural politics of transition in the former Soviet bloc (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine).

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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