

War Party Takes Aim at Syria

by Dean Andromidas

Syria is now in the gun-sights of the “utopian” war party in Washington and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. In the space of a few days, amid maneuvers by Sharon to try to strengthen his own government despite the collapse of Israel’s economy, that government has targetted Syria for the next expansion of Israel’s religious-war drive.

On May 20, a powerful car bomb killed Jihad Jibril, son of Ahmed Jibril, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), the Palestinian faction most closely identified with Syria (Ahmed Jibril is a former Syrian military officer). The organization is headquartered in Damascus, and is on the U.S. State Department’s list of terrorist organizations. On the same day, the dead body of Ramzi Iranya was discovered in the trunk of his car, parked on one of Beirut, Lebanon’s seaside thoroughfares. Ramzi, who had been kidnapped on May 7, was a leader of the Maronite Lebanese Forces Party. Both murders fuelled fear of a renewal of the sectarian strife that raged during Lebanon’s catastrophic civil war.

An Israeli intelligence source told *EIR* that the murders were provocations carried out by the Israelis and aimed at ensuring that Syria does not take moderate positions that would promote a peace process. The actions may also be aimed at provoking a reaction. Israelis are predicting retaliation, not only in Israel, but in Europe or the United States.

At the same time as Jibril was assassinated, ABC TV, citing U.S. intelligence and law enforcement officials, was reporting that leaders of the al-Qaeda organization held a summit with Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas militants in Beirut. They allegedly discussed attacks against targets, including the United States and Britain, both domestically and overseas. Syria is seen as the main power behind the Lebanese government, and such a meeting is presumed not to have taken place without its permission. Although officially denied by the U.S. government, the report is part of an ongoing press campaign identifying Syria as a sponsor of terrorism.

In a speech the same week, Vice President Dick Cheney mentioned Syria and Iran as states responsible for terrorism, and the State Department issued its latest global terrorism report, with Syria still on its list of state sponsors of terrorism.

The Strategic Importance of Syria

Syria is key to any war launched against Iraq. George H.W. Bush’s 1991 Gulf War, with its broad Arab coalition,

could not have been possible without Syrian support. This is because of Syria’s special alliance with both Saudi Arabia—particularly the circles around Crown Prince Abdullah—and Iran. Crown Prince Abdullah is married into a leading Syrian family, and the kingdom no doubt contributes to Syria economically. Syria’s relationship to Iran is also important, because Syria has seen this alliance as a counterbalance to its own and Iran’s traditional rivals in the region, especially Turkey, Iraq, and Israel.

The Saudi and Iranian interests converge in Lebanon, where Syria is seen by Arab countries as a guarantor of stability in the country, an important financial center for the Arab world, and an ongoing target of Israeli aggression and subversion. As for the Iranians, they have alliances with the Shi’ite population, particularly the militant Hezbollah. While the Anglo-Americans have traditionally played these various rivalries, recent moves toward a rapprochement with Iraq by all these states, have given them nightmares. Syria has even reopened an oil pipeline between Iraq and the Mediterranean, which it had kept closed for almost two decades.

For the war party in Washington, knocking out Syria, or coopting it to its war plans, is crucial to isolating both Iraq and Iran, in preparation for military strikes.

War with Syria is also on Sharon’s agenda. A senior Israeli intelligence source said, “Syria is being kept alive as a potential target. If war is launched against Iraq, Sharon will attack Syria, that is a foregone conclusion.” Damascus is located a mere 60 kilometers from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. In 1982, when Sharon organized the invasion and conquest of Lebanon, many thought that his real target was eventually an invasion of Syria, and a strike at Damascus.

New Civil War in Lebanon?

The way to destabilize Syria is through destabilizing Lebanon, where it remains the power behind the Beirut government. The twin murders of Jibril and Irani brought back to the Lebanese bitter memories of a civil war that lasted for over a decade. On Jan. 24 of this year, a powerful car bomb had killed Elie Hobeika, the former Christian militia leader who, only hours before his death, had agreed to travel to Belgium in order to testify in a court investigating Sharon’s role in the infamous 1982 Sabra and Chatila massacre of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

It is widely believed that Sharon had ordered Hobeika’s assassination, in what would have been Israel’s first “targetted assassination” outside the West Bank and Gaza since Sharon came to power.

These three murders are the first political assassinations since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990. That civil war was kindled through strife between the various factions in the refugee camps which are home to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, and the various sectarian groups that make up Lebanese society, including the Christian Maronites, the Sunni Muslims, and the Shi’ite Muslims. As early as 1974,

Israel was quick to work with the Maronite Christian militias, who were fighting the Palestinian groups based in the refugee camps. In 1974, Israel's current defense minister, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, served as a liaison to these Christian militias.

Sharon's grand scheme in 1982 was to dismember Lebanon, set up a Maronite puppet state which would stretch from Beirut to Israel's northern border, and expel the 100,000 Palestinian refugees living in southern Lebanon. Through such a scheme, Sharon hoped to secure the Golan Heights, with its water resources, as well as the Litani River, one of the most important rivers in Lebanon and the region.

The PFLP-GC, led by Jihad Jibril's father Ahmed, is one of the most militant of the Palestinian factions in the so-called Rejection Front. The group is sponsored by Syria, and has been thrown out of the Palestine Liberation Organization, but is active in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, particularly those in the north, where the PLO is not strongly supported. Its operations in the occupied territories have been minimal, although its fighters are extremely effective, and are said to have been responsible for several highly effective attacks, destroying Israeli tanks and attacking Israeli military outposts. It has also engaged in several spectacular international terrorist operations, including airplane hijackings.

Ramzi Iranya comes from the diametrically opposite end of the Lebanese political spectrum. The 36-year-old engineer was a leader in the Maronite Lebanese Forces Party, which is the only faction that has been outlawed. Its leader, Samir Geagea, is currently sitting in a Lebanese jail. In 1982, Sharon sought to make its leader, Bashir Gemayel, President of Lebanon, only to see him assassinated. The militia associated with these people was the most bitter enemy of the Palestinians, and Sharon deployed them into the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps to conduct one of the worst massacres of civilians since World War II. It was Elie Hobeika who led these Christian militias, with the aid of the Israeli military.

Is Israel trying to rekindle a Lebanese civil war, by sparking Palestinian-Maronite strife?

Sharon Needs War To Stop Netanyahu

Sharon knows he cannot survive, economically or politically, unless he continues his drive for war. Domestically no longer in the shadows, is Sharon's chief rival, Benjamin Netanyahu, who challenged Sharon at a Likud party central committee meeting early in May, where a resolution was passed, sponsored by Netanyahu, rejecting any Palestinian state; this was ballyhooed as a defeat for Sharon. The recent crisis over an emergency economic austerity plan, which led Sharon to throw out of his Cabinet two of his major coalition partners—Shas and the United Torah Judaism party—could lead to the collapse of his government and new elections.

An Israeli intelligence source warned that if Sharon decides to go for new elections, he would launch a military operation, either a massive attack on the Gaza Strip, or an attack on the Syrian-Lebanon front.