

Jerusalem source: Syria is worried by Iran's 'bear hug'

Contributed by Haaretz-Debkafile
Monday, 13 August 2007
Last Updated Monday, 13 August 2007

A government official in Jerusalem said Saturday that although Damascus believes Tehran is the 'best thing they have at the moment,' Syria is not yet a satellite of Iran and can still be extricated from an Iranian "bear-hug."

The official told Haaretz that Syria believes that Iran provides it with security but is being careful not to become a client state. Syria is said to be particularly worried that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague will find it responsible for the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. Jerusalem reportedly believes Syria was behind the murder, and if the ICJ rules as such, Syria's diplomatic isolation will increase. Damascus is also concerned over a possible Israeli attack, and Israel has therefore signaled to the Syrians a number of times that it does not have any belligerent intentions.

"The more the American threat against Syria grows, the more calls are heard for maqawamah - violent resistance to Israel," the official said. "Then the moment will come when Syria won't be able to extricate itself from the Iranian alliance, but we still have not reached that point. They are tightening their connections to Iran because that is the best thing they have at the moment."

Jerusalem views Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Damascus last month as a good example of Syrian concern over Israeli intentions. As opposed to Ahmadinejad, who resoundingly predicted a "hot summer" and spoke in favor of "defeats for the enemies of the region," Assad's tone was restrained and even his body language at their press conference conveyed distance, officials said.

The analysis by senior Syrian journalist Ibrahim Hamidi of a joint declaration from Assad and Ahmadinejad made at the end of Syrian-Iranian summit lends credence to this view. Writing in the London-based daily Al-Hayat Hamidi said critics of the Syrian regime argue that Syrian decisions are made in Iran. However, the declaration, he says, shows reciprocity; for example, Iran gave in to the Syrian demand to include in the document Syria's right to restore the Golan Heights to the borders of June 4, 1967. It was the first time Iran acceded to a Syrian demand in a joint document, Hamidi wrote. Western diplomats in Damascus told Al-Hayat that they wondered whether to interpret the statement as some sort of recognition of Israel by Tehran, despite Ahmadinejad's call to destroy "the Zionist entity."

Last week, the Iranian ambassador to Syria called for Iranians to invest in Syria in every possible area. One of these is energy, given the frequent electricity outages this summer in Syria, which Prime Minister Mohammed Naji al-Otari says stem from "political reasons," that is, the international isolation of Damascus.

In Israel, it is believed that if the United States changes its policy of isolating Syria and calling for the heads of the regime in Damascus, Israel might "change direction." However, while the U.S. is in contact with the Syrian opposition, which includes the Muslim Brotherhood, Israel believes that the alternatives to Assad are not necessarily better.

Rumors have been flying recently in Damascus as well as Beirut over the possibility of hostilities breaking out between Israel and Syria, despite Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's statement last week that we can expect a "calm summer, calm autumn and calm winter." Jerusalem feels that Syria is concerned over an Israeli attack, possibly against supply convoys to Hezbollah or on a Palestinian leader like Hamas political head Khaled Meshal.

Assad presented a new peace plan last month in a speech to parliament, which included a demand for Israel to commit in writing to a withdrawal to the 1967 borders. An official in Jerusalem said this message is not necessarily "illogical" considering the willingness Israel has shown in the past to withdraw to these borders.

Jerusalem has also taken positive note of Assad's statement that the final border will be marked by representatives of the two countries. No one knows exactly where the border ran in 1967, an official said, "so there is room for flexibility here."

By Yoav Stern, Haaretz, Last update - 23:09 12/08/2007

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=892232&contrassID=1&subContrassID=1>

Iran Plots Syrian President's Ouster

From DEBKA-Net-Weekly

Buoyed up by the triumphs of Hizballah's war offensive against Israel in 2006 and Hamas's takeover of Gaza, the clerical rulers of Tehran have invested so heavily in their expanding power structure across the region that a fiasco could push their regime and military prop, the fierce Revolutionary Guards, into a perilous slide at home. To play it safe, DEBKA-Net-Weekly's Iran sources reveal they have hatched a plan to replace the vacillating figure in Damascus with a puppet at their beck and call, modeled on Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut.

Thus far, Assad has not strayed too far from the guidelines he and his Iranian allies laid down together, but Tehran can never be sure when he might swerve from the straight and narrow to make his peace with the Americans. The can only guarantee Syria stays in their pockets by installing a pro-Iran loyalist in the presidential palace in Damascus.

Sources close to Persian Gulf rulers believe that if Tehran opts for this course, its chosen instrument for throwing up a military ruler would be the Syrian armed forces, on the assumption that a general has the best chance of unifying the country and its ethnic and religious minorities around the new regime. The Iranians have therefore doubled and tripled their efforts to build up influence in the Syrian army.

An overt manifestation of their success is the prevalence of Syrian army men sporting beards in the style of Revolutionary Guardsmen.

But two additional Iranian steps have been more discreet.

1. Three-week, five-star vacations in Iran are being handed out to hundreds of graduates of every Syrian officers' course and their families. While the families visit tourist sites, the graduates undergo indoctrination at special RGs seminaries.
2. Last April, RG instructors began handpicking outstanding Syrian officers at these courses and forming them into secret cells for planting in military units on their return home. They are trained to seize centers of government, military installations and public buildings.

It is not known if Assad knows what is going on in his armed forces, or how deeply collaboration with Iranian intelligence for implanting these cells has penetrated the high Syrian command.

Such information would be of paramount bearing on the Syrian ruler's decision on whether or not to stage a flare-up with Israel, now projected for November or early next winter. An American intelligence estimate, passed to Israel last week, predicts that Syria will then plans to ignite clashes by low-intensity military operations to test Israel's responses.

The Syrian leadership is divided on this issue:

The anti-war faction. This camp consists of the veteran class of Syrian army generals, traditionally the most American-oriented of the armed forces. Its leaders, defense minister Gen. Hassan Turkemany, chief of staff Gen. Habib Ali, and the presidential military and intelligence adviser Gen. Muhammed Nasif, all urge abstaining from hostile action against Israel.

The pro-war faction. This camp is headed by the Gen. Assaf Shawqat, head of Syrian military intelligence and the president's brother-in-law. Around him is a band of ambitious young Syrian generals and colonels who have not yet made their name. They network closely with the high command of Iran's armed forces and Revolutionary Guards.

Their argument for war is that the Assad regime is wobbling so badly that it would take the extreme measure of a war with Israel to unite the country behind the national leadership. These young Turks have convinced Assad that Israel is determined to avoid the kind of large-scale ground operation which went awry in the 2006 Lebanon War and will therefore focus on aerial bombardments of military bases and certain infrastructure targets such as bridges, power plants and water works. They estimate that even then, Israel will confine itself to a limited air offensive, because its policy-makers and military leaders alike will be leery of provoking reprisal from Syrian medium range ground-to-ground C and D Scud missiles against the central and southern populations.

By mid-July, the war faction appeared to be winning the upper hand with President Assad, against the veteran generals.

At the same time, neither camp can know for sure exactly where aggressive action against Israel may lead. A Syrian military defeat in a battle for the Golan and heavy Israeli bombardments deep inside Syria could generate conditions for a military coup d'état against Assad by generals held up as popular heroes for fighting Israel.

At the same time, Assad's failure to repulse heavy Israeli military pressure would open the door to Iranian military intervention and a tailor-made opportunity for ousting the regime in Damascus.

<http://www.debka.com/article.php?aid=1296>