



THE COMING **MIDDLE EAST WAR**

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The warning signs are everywhere, yet no one wishes to see them. Israel's foes are gearing up for war, and it's time that we opened our eyes to the danger that confronts us.

The conflict may be just weeks or even months away, or perhaps a bit longer. How it will start is anyone's guess, but make no mistake, a major outbreak of hostilities is almost certainly around the corner.

If this sounds like scare-mongering or even an advanced case of paranoia to you, just take a glance at the newspapers from the past few weeks. If you read them with a discerning eye, you will see exactly what I mean.

For whichever direction one chooses to look, be it north, south or east of us, trouble - major trouble - is brewing.

In Lebanon, Hizb'allah is busy rebuilding its expansive terrorist infrastructure after this summer's fighting with Israel. Under the protective shield of UN troops, the group has been welcoming large shipments of weapons from Iran and Syria, and fortifying its bunkers in advance of the next round of conflict.

In a speech delivered last month in Beirut, on September 22, Hizbullah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah asserted that his organization still has "more than 20,000 rockets" and that it had "recovered all its organizational and military capabilities."

Even if we allow for an element of boasting and exaggeration, there are clear signs that Nasrallah is steadily engaged in rebuilding his forces.

Indeed, this past Sunday, Brig.-Gen. Yossi Baidatz, head of the IDF intelligence directorate's research department, told the weekly Cabinet meeting that, "There is conclusive and decisive evidence" that Syria is rearming Hizbullah.

"The weapons smuggling from Syria into Lebanon," Baidatz said, "is continuing with official Syrian involvement." He added that Damascus has kept its forces on a war footing, with their artillery and missiles deployed in forward battle positions.

Along these lines, Syrian President Bashar Assad has made a series of public statements in recent weeks, speaking openly about the possibility of military conflict with Israel and his desire to retake the Golan Heights by force.

In an interview with the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Anba on October 6, Assad said that Damascus was ready for war with the Jewish state. Previously, he insisted that the Golan would be "liberated by Syrian arms," and warned Israel to "seek peace or face the threat of defeat."

TURNING SOUTH toward Gaza, the situation is likewise disturbing. Palestinian terrorists continue to fire Kassam rockets into the Negev on a daily basis, hitting Israeli towns and communities such as Sderot and Nir Am.

Since the start of the year, Hamas is said to have smuggled into Gaza over 20 tons of explosives, anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles. According to media reports, Hamas has also assembled an armed military force consisting of 7,500 fighters, which is said to include specialized units such as snipers, missile batteries and anti-tank troops.

As Yediot Aharonot military correspondent Alex Fishman recently put it, "The Palestinians are arming themselves to the teeth, building a military force, defensive systems and preparing Hizbullah-style surprises."

Nor is Hamas hiding its intentions. In a statement issued on Monday, the group's Izzadin al-Kassam brigades declared that it has the "means and arms necessary to confront the Zionist enemy with all our force."

Saying they are "totally ready to resist," Hamas added somewhat ominously that, "We have finished preparations to teach the Zionist enemy a lesson it will not forget."

And then, of course, there is the threat from Teheran to our east, where the Iranian president speaks of wiping Israel off the map even as he continues to pursue his nuclear ambitions.

If anyone thinks that Mr. Ahmadinejad is open to compromise, they should take a look at his latest ramblings. Speaking at a mosque in Teheran on Monday, the Iranian leader insisted that he had received a Divine message indicating that his country would prevail. "One day," he said, "I will be asked whether I have been in touch with someone who told me we would win, and I will respond: 'Yes, I have been in touch with God'."

As if all this were not enough, there have been persistent reports in recent months about a growing al-Qaida presence in the territories, as the international terrorist group seeks to position itself for launching strikes

against the Jewish state.

And so, Israel now finds itself surrounded by an arc of hate stretching from Beirut and Damascus in the north, to Teheran in the east, and back to Gaza in the south. Along each chord of this arc, our foes are diligently arming themselves and preparing for battle, both verbally and in practice. It seems safe to assume that these coordinated efforts are no coincidence, and that they are all linked to the seemingly inevitable confrontation that is looming over the region regarding Iran's nuclear program.

Just as Iran sought to send a message to Israel and the US this summer by provoking an outbreak of hostilities in Lebanon, so too Teheran now appears determined to lay the groundwork for a much greater, and far more ambitious, flare-up, one that would threaten to consume the entire region. The Iranians presumably view this as their trump card, thinking that it will give them the means of forestalling a possible US or Israeli attack on their nuclear facilities.

As a result, they have been working to strengthen the extremists throughout the region, who share their desire to hit America and Israel. In all probability, they are merely waiting for the opportune moment with which to set in motion the next provocative act, which will be aimed at igniting the entire Middle East.

HOW SHOULD Israel react to this growing threat? First, we must learn the lesson of this summer's Lebanon war, which was disastrous precisely because we sat back and allowed our enemies to build up their military infrastructure over time.

Instead of making this same mistake once again, Israel should take whatever steps are necessary to interdict weapons shipments to the terrorists, seal off their supply routes, and hit hard at those who are sending them the weapons in the first place.

Second, the government needs to begin seriously contemplating the possibility of launching preemptive and wide-ranging military strikes. Our foes are openly preparing for war, so why should we allow them the luxury to choose when it starts?

Passivity and indecisiveness cost us dearly in the past, and especially in Lebanon this summer. We can not allow ourselves to play by the enemy's rules, or even by his schedule, should this scenario once again come to pass.

I truly hope that I am wrong, and that diplomacy and common sense will somehow prevail. The last thing Israel needs right now is another painful conflict, and we should all pray to God for His mercy and intervention.

But as in the past, our enemies may leave us with no other choice but to fight. This time around, let's just make sure we are ready for the challenge.

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