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Opinion — Israel, Lebanon & the Syrian play

By **Alain-Michel Ayache**, Special to The Suburban

It did not take long for the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon, to realize the determination of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad to destabilize Lebanon should the international community insist on implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1757 and creating the international tribunal to investigate and judge the criminals responsible for the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri.

This is what France's diplomatic *Le Monde* has reported quoting sources to the head of the world body.

One can then understand from this "leak" of information that the message, which Damascus is trying to convey to whomever it may concern, is that she is posing as a mandatory passage for any U.S. solution for the Middle East.

Moreover, and using new Machiavellian skills, Assad multiplies the signs of an opening towards a possible resumption of the peace talks with Israel at the same time as he keeps alive threats of a confrontation.

Indeed, according to rumours in Arab capitals, Damascus may have already decided to launch guerrilla attacks "in September" against Israeli positions on the Golan Heights captured by the IDF in 1967.

The attacks would be similar to those used by Hezbollah against Zahal.

The fact that the Assad regime tries to disseminate such information to whomever would like to hear it is in itself a sign that Damascus is not bowing to international pressures.

On the contrary, it seems ready to pursue its destabilization of Lebanon, as well as the region as a whole.

Moreover, looking closely, one realizes that the Syrian policy is to join the Iranians in countering Saudi influence for control of the region.

Arab newspapers in the region report that Western and Arab observers with pertinent knowledge of Arab countries' internal and regional policies, place the reason for this at the feet of Sunni fundamentalist militias initially funded by the Saudis to counter the Shiite axis but who have now turned against Saudi Arabia.

Their numbers include the suicide bombers that Syria uses to send to Iraq and constitute the bulk of the Fatah al-Islam and Jund el-Sham militias in Lebanon where they are currently fighting in Nahr el-Bared, the so-called Palestinian "refugee" camp which is in fact a town, against the Lebanese Army.

Trying to counter a large Shiite wave on the Middle East, Saudi Arabia seems to have created a Sunni axis that has been brought into the Iranian orbit.

The first confrontations are the ones in Iraq and Lebanon.

Anxious to preserve its place in the regional arena, Syria has allied itself to Iran to oppose the main U.S. policies seeking to change the face of the Middle East.

First, democratization of the area as conceived by the Bush Administration through the elimination of Iraq's Baath party and the installation of a representative democracy.

Secondly, making Lebanon an example of co-operation between divergent communities and pushing for the birth of new democratic political regional entities which would replace the current existing dictatorships.

Damascus found its response and its strategy in the mobilization of Shiite and Sunni fundamentalists and terrorists, by arming them and involving them in many terror attacks against Lebanese and UNIFIL peacekeepers in Lebanon, as well as against the Marines and U.K. soldiers in Iraq.

Damascus also assured them of refuge in the Palestinian military camps in Lebanon from where they launch their attacks against the Lebanese Army.

Assad is trying to break Saudi influence in Lebanon by destroying the national consensus and by encouraging Hezbollah to paralyze the institutions of the country.

The Syrian play would then aim to institutionalize an alliance with Iran to frighten the Gulf states as was the case a few weeks ago in Bahrain following remarks from Teheran that suggested a demand for the return of the Shiite part of Bahrain to Iran.

Assad thinks he has nothing to lose and everything to gain now.

The main question up in the air is will the West once again fall into the Syrian trap in the name of Realpolitik, and try to maintain a perverted stability to the detriment of the freedom of the Lebanese.

Paris may attempt to gather some Lebanese factions around a consensus to oppose the Syrian play, but it is Washington that has the only real power to change the future of the Levant for the better.

The major problem facing Washington is the lack of an alternative to the current regime in Syria. Between Assad's current dictatorship of the Alawite minority and a Sunni fundamentalist regime backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, America prefers the former.

The problem is that Assad knows it and is using it to his advantage.

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