

HIZBULLAH, SYRIA, IRAN

Playing with Fire

Uri Avnery

WE ARE ready for the next war," a reserve soldier in the Israel Defense Forces told a TV reporter this week, on the scene of a brigade-size maneuver on the Golan Heights.

What war? Against whom? About what? This was not stated, and not even asked. The soldier saw it as self-evident that war will break out soon, and it seems that he did not particularly care against whom.

Politicians are used to expressing themselves more cautiously, in words like "If, God forbid, a war should break out". But in Israeli public discourse, the next war is seen as a natural phenomenon, like tomorrow's sunrise. Of course, war will break out. The only question is against whom.

AND INDEED—against whom? Perhaps Hizbullah again?

Quite possibly. In the Knesset and the media, a lively debate took place this week about whether Hizbullah has already regained all the capabilities it had before the Second Lebanon War, or not yet. In a Knesset committee, there was an altercation between one of the Army Intelligence chiefs, who vigorously insisted that this was so, and the Minister of Defense, who voiced his opinion that Hizbullah has only the "potential" to get there.

Hassan Nasrallah, who has a wonderful talent for driving Israelis up the wall, poured oil on the flames by announcing, in a public speech, that arms were flowing to him from Syria, and that he transfers them to the south in trucks "covered with straw". Let them all know.

Israeli commentators reacted by declaring that "no later than this summer" the Israeli army will be compelled to attack in Lebanon in order to remove the danger, and, on this occasion, also to eradicate the shame and restore to the army the "deterrent power" that was lost on the battlefields of that unfortunate war.

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OR PERHAPS Syria, this time?

That is also possible. After all, this week's brigade maneuver, the first for a long time, was held on the Golan and obviously directed against Damascus.

True, the Syrians have offered peace. They are going out of their way to tempt Israel to start negotiations.

But that is out of the question. President Bush has forbidden Israel to take even the tiniest step in that direction. Bush is threatening Syria with war and it is unthinkable that Israel, the loyal camp-follower, would make peace with somebody America does not like. No, peace with Syria is not on the cards. Forget it.

And, as the Romans did not say: "si non vis pacem, para bellum"--if you do not want peace, prepare for war.

Preparations go well beyond training the forces on the ground. They also have a psychological dimension. The day before yesterday, an extra-large front page headline in *Haaretz* announced: "Syrian Arms Race With the Help of Iran". The other media followed suit. It was said that Russia was supplying Syria with huge quantities of anti-tank weapons, of the kind that penetrated even the most advanced Israeli tanks in the recent war. And, as if that was not enough, Russia is also providing Syria with anti-shiping missiles that would be a real threat to the Israeli navy, and long-range missiles that can reach every corner of Israel.

The news story puts together three countries—Syria, Russia and Iran—which are, quite fortuitously, the three members of Bush's new "axis of evil".

Clearly, this media campaign is being orchestrated by the army chiefs and is connected with the maneuver. As a matter of fact, it is the first action by the new Chief-of-Staff, Gaby Ashkenazi, who observed the maneuver in the company of the Minister of Defense, Amir Peretz. (A quick-witted photographer caught Peretz viewing the action through binoculars. But the lens caps were still on, and so he obviously saw nothing but black.)

Truth is that no danger lurks in that direction. There is not the slightest possibility that Syria would attack Israel. The military capabilities of Syria, even with all the Russian arms they may get, are vastly inferior to those of the Israeli army. That is the considered view of the entire Israeli intelligence community. If Syria rearms, it is for defensive purposes. They are, quite justly, afraid of Israel and the United States.

But if one wants war, what does that matter?

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AND PERHAPS these are simply diversionary tactics, in order to shift attention away from the real target of the next war--Iran?

For many months now, western media have been voicing dark warnings about Iran almost daily. Within a few years they are going to have the capability to carry out a "Second Holocaust", as well as the will to do so. The picture is of a crazy country, headed by a Second Hitler, who is prepared to have Iran annihilated if this is the price of wiping Israel off the map.

Against such an enemy, of course, the old Hebrew adage applies: "He who gets up to kill you, go and kill him first."

AFTER THE Six-Day War, a pacifist satire bore the title: "You and I and the Next War". ("You" in the feminine form.) Perhaps it should be revived now.

During the last few days, a very large ad appeared in the newspapers, signed by a group calling itself "The Reserve Soldiers" and claiming to represent the disappointed reservists of the last war. The ad sets out all the reasons for removing Olmert from power, and reaches its climax with the dire warning: "He will remain on his chair and direct the next war."

Perhaps that is exactly what he has in mind. Israelis never had a prime minister mired so deeply in a quagmire of troubles. In a few weeks, the Commission of Inquiry of the Second Lebanon War will publish its findings. True, it was Olmert himself who appointed the commission and handpicked its members, in order to avoid falling into the hands of a judicial board of inquiry, whose members would have been appointed by the Supreme Court, and who might have been much less considerate. But even so, he may survive the findings of the commission only by the skin of his teeth. At the same time, several corruption allegations against him are being investigated by the police.

True, Olmert succeeded last week in appointing new police chiefs (including a personal friend) as well as a new Minister of Justice to his liking, but this also does not guarantee him full immunity.

In the meantime he only exemplifies an old truth: a clever person knows how to extricate himself from a trap that a wise person would not have fallen into in the first place.

He has no agenda. He said so himself. He is the chief of an amorphous party, without members or institutions and without real roots in the community. Public opinion polls show that his ratings are nearing the bottom (only the Minister of Defense has sunk even lower.) Olmert remains in power only because many believe that all the available alternatives would be even worse.

A cynical Prime Minister, entrapped in such a situation, could easily be tempted to start another military adventure, in the hope that it would give him back his lost popularity and divert attention from his private and political troubles. If this is the aim, it really does not matter much against whom—Palestinians, Lebanese, Syrians or Iranians. The main thing is that it should happen as soon as possible, preferably this summer at the latest. What remains is to convince the public of the pre-sence of an existential danger, but in Israel that is not too difficult.

ALL THIS reminds one, of course, of another outstanding leader—George W. Bush. Amazing how these two find themselves in almost the same situation.

The American political system is admired by many in Israel, and from time to time the cry goes up that it should be adopted by Israelis, too. A strong leader, elected fairly directly by the people, who appoints competent ministers—what could be better?

But it seems that the American system has created a terrifying situation: President Bush has two more years in office—and in this time he can start any war at will, even though now the American public has clearly shown in the congressional elections that it loathes the Iraq war. As Commander-in-Chief of the most powerful military forces in the world, he can widen and deepen the war in Iraq, and at the same time start a new war against Iran or Syria.

The two houses of Congress can, in theory, stop him by cutting the allocations for the armed forces, but most of the members of these two august bodies are windbags who are terrified out of their wits (if they have any) by the very thought. Any marine in Baghdad has more guts than the whole bunch of Senators and Congressmen together. They would not even dream of impeaching the President.

Thus, one single person can cause a world-wide catastrophe. He has no brakes, but has a strong drive towards war: to fulfil his "vision" (dictated to him by God Himself in private conversation) and to retouch his image in history.

Is this practical? Well, the American army is too small to conduct another major war on the ground. But Bush and his advisors believe that there is no need for that. They are the successors to the American general who in his time talked about "bombing Vietnam back to the stone age". After all, it worked in Serbia and Afghanistan.

The neo-cons, who still reign supreme in Washington, are convinced that a rain of many hundreds of smart bombs on all the nuclear, military, governmental and public installations in Iran could "do the job". Their friends in Israel will applaud, since that would relieve Israel of the need to do something similar, if on a smaller scale.

But an American and/or Israeli adventure would be a disaster. Bombs can devastate a country, but not a people like the Iranians. Only the wildest imagination can foresee how the more than a billion Muslims in scores of countries would react to the destruction of a Muslim country (even a Shiite one). This is playing with fire, which may start a world-wide conflagration. ☹☹☹