

## Robert Fisk: Lebanon will be first victim of Iran crisis

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How easily the sparks from the American-Israeli fire fall across the Middle East. Every threat, every intransigence uttered in Washington and Tehran now burns a little bit more of Lebanon. It is not by chance that the UN forces in the south of the country now face growing suspicion among the Shia Muslims who live there. It is no coincidence that Israel thunders that the Hizbollah are now more powerful than they were before last year's July war. It is not an accident that Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's leader, says he has brought more missiles into Lebanon.

Why, the Lebanese ask, did President Bashar al-Assad of Syria visit President Ahmadinejad of Iran last weekend? To further seal their "brotherly" relations? Or to plan a new war with Israel in Lebanon?

The images of Iran's new missile launches during three days of military manoeuvres - apparently long-range rockets which could be fired at US warships in the Gulf - were splashed across the Beirut papers yesterday morning, along with Washington's latest threats of air strikes against Iran's military. Be certain that the Lebanese will be the first to suffer.

For the West, the crisis in Lebanon - where Hizbollah and its allies are still demanding the resignation of Fouad Siniora's government - is getting more serious by the hour. Up to 20,000 UN troops - including Nato battalions of Spanish, French and Italian forces - are now billeted across the hillsides of southern Lebanon, in the very battleground upon which the Israelis and the Hizbollah are threatening to fight each other again.

If Israel is America's proxy (which the Lebanese don't doubt), then Hizbollah is Iran's proxy. The more the United States and Israel warn Iran of its supposed nuclear ambitions, the more Hizbollah increases the pressure on Lebanon.

Already, there are dangerous signs of what may be to come. Spanish troops were stoned by youths in a Lebanese village last week. French soldiers who arrived at Maroun al-Ras with their weekly medical convoy for local Lebanese civilians were told in no uncertain terms that they were not welcome. The French left immediately. Was this because President Jacques Chirac, busy commemorating his murdered Lebanese friend Rafiq Hariri in Paris on Monday, is now talking of placing UN forces not just along the Lebanese border with Israel but along the country's frontier with Syria as well?

M. Chirac is warning that last summer's war between the Hizbollah and Israel could "re-plunge Lebanon into a deep crisis". If the Lebanese don't pull themselves together, the French President added, they could "slide once more into a fatal chasm". These are not words which are likely to commend themselves to President Assad or his opposite number in Tehran.

Add to this the statement by Brigadier Yossi Baidatz, Israel's head of research for military intelligence - disputed by Amir Peretz, the country's Defence Minister - that the Hizbollah "is building up more firepower than it had before the war... some is still en route from Syria", and it's not difficult to see why a visiting delegation of Italian senators in Beirut have been expressing their fears for their own country's UN troops in southern Lebanon.

An Italian major general, Claudio Graziano, has just taken command of the multinational force, Unifil, and has been described by the Israelis as an expert in "counter-terrorism" - not quite the praise that General Graziano is likely to have wanted from the Israelis as he faces the dangers of the coming weeks and months. In fact, generals seem all the rage in Lebanon these days, the latest of whom - the Lebanese army commander General Michel Sulieman - has made a speech of remarkable common sense, effectively blaming Lebanon's politicians for not creating the unity which might resolve its problems.

In last month's street fighting in Beirut and other towns, General Sulieman's soldiers achieved the extraordinary feat of repeatedly breaking up riots without killing a single one of their own citizens.

"Lebanon cannot be governed by its military or through a dictatorship," he said. "It is a country satiated with democracy... but such a great amount of democracy in Lebanon might lead to chaos.

"Soldiers are even more conscientious than many leaders in this country."

Up to 70 per cent of the Lebanese army - which is now a volunteer, rather than a conscript force - are Shia, which is why it cannot be used to disarm the Shia Hizbollah