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Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Israel, a smoking gun?

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The accusations come almost every day from Israeli officials: Iran is seeking a nuclear weapon; Hezbollah is smuggling weapons into the south of Lebanon, with the help of Syria. These claims turned during the last days into a verbal battle mainly between Syria and Israel.

And in the Middle East where everything seems to be connected, analysts are wondering whether this round of threats will result in a regional war that involves Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Israel.

ON THE BORDERS OF LEBANON, ISRAEL

Tension on Lebanon's borders with Israel has been on the rise in recent weeks. Israel said that the Lebanese government not Hezbollah, will be solely responsible for any violence on the border, as Hezbollah now holds two seats in Lebanon's 30-seat government.

Lebanon also accuses Israel of violating resolution 1701 for more than 6,500 times since 2006, and abducting its citizen last week.

Informed Lebanese sources have said that Hezbollah cadres have been on alert in all Lebanese regions, and the party's officials have been advised to take precautions against any possible Israeli attack.

Ammar Moussawi, Hezbollah official in charge of international relations, stressed after a rare meeting with UN special envoy Michael Williams last week the party's readiness for any Israeli aggression.

Dr. Hilal Khashan, a Palestinian-American scholar chairing of Department of Political Studies and Public Administration at the American University of Beirut, said that "the war is looming."

He said one of the possibilities is that Israel wages a preemptive war against Hezbollah, which is supported by Iran, and is a much more imminent threat to its security."

Hezbollah fought a devastating 34-day war with Israel in 2006 after abducting two Israeli soldiers on the borders with Lebanon. Now the Jewish state accuses the Shiite armed group of stockpiling 40,000 rockets, over twice of it owned before 2006 war.

Israeli Defense Ministry official Amos Gilad told Israel Radio last week that the newly developed "Iron Dome" short-range missile shield may also aim at Lebanon front.

Lebanese cabinet stressed on Thursday its united stance in facing Israeli aggression, while Prime Minister Saad Hariri said he would launch a series of international talks to face the challenge. "Arguably, neither side wants a showdown at this stage," said Peter Harling, director of the Syria Project for the International Crisis Group.

"But history shows wars don't necessarily require a consensus; rhetorical escalation, the absence of effective containment and mediation mechanisms, and a measure of miscalculation can suffice," he added.

SYRIA'S WAR?

When meeting with visiting Lebanese speaker Nabih Berri on Sunday, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said that his country would support Lebanon in event of any attack from Israel.

During the 2006 war, Syria avoided entering it directly. It allegedly acted as a conduit for weapons to Hezbollah, but did not interfere directly. This time around, Syria's stance seems to have changed.

While al-Assad accused Israel last week of pushing the region towards war, Syria's Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem stressed that a war against its ally, Hezbollah, will involve his country too.

Al-Moallem said that "Undoubtedly, if we suppose that this war will break out, then I say that war will be all-out, whether it hits south Lebanon or Syria."

Al-Assad and al-Moallem remarks were the clearest signs that Syria will not stand aside in any coming war against Hezbollah, one of its strongest allies in Lebanon and in the Middle East.

"The war will not be excluded between Lebanon and Israel, but a comprehensive regional war," said Khashan.

Khashan explains that "if Israel wages war against Hezbollah, it will enter Hezbollah's

stronghold the Bekaa Valley, only 22 km from Damascus. That will be a big threat to Syria, which will definitely be dragged into the war."

In 2007, Israeli warplanes bombed a suspected nuclear site inside Syria. Damascus vowed to retaliate "in the right time and the right place."

Pan-Arab daily Asharq Al-Awsat said last January that Syria had begun calling up troops from the Fourth Reserve, which includes workers living in Lebanon. Syrian sources told the newspaper that "Syria opposes any aggression against any Arab country, especially Lebanon."

IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM AND LEBANON

Khashan believed the origin of the tension along Lebanon-Israel was apparently from Iranian nuclear issue, which seems to escalate as time goes.

The Head of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Ali Akbar Salehi said on Sunday that the 20 percent enriched uranium would be produced at facilities in the central Iranian city of Natanz starting Tuesday. The West and Israel feared that the Islamic Republic can get the know-how to make the weapon-grade enriched uranium.

While Hezbollah's Kassem warned last year that a war against Iran would backfire in all of the Middle East, Khaled Mashaal, Hamas chief, said in Tehran last December that if Iran is attacked "all the resistance movements in the region will act as one movement against Israel."

A dump of regional issue who has little say even on its own national security, Lebanon's destiny is in other's hands.

"Lebanon's fragmented socio-political fabric, the weakness of its state and its frontline quality in the Arab-Israeli conflict have made it historically permeable to outside players, who may use its territory to play out their own battles at little cost to themselves," Harling said.

Khashan thought that if Israel carries out its threat to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, the main retaliation is likely to come from Hezbollah, then after four years Lebanon will again be torn by war.

While more than 1,200 civilians, most of whom Lebanese were killed during the 2006 war, Khashan believes that the next battle "will bring peace to the region," saying that "it may be a war like the Middle East War in 1973 that every party can claim victory."

"Syria will not be destroyed, and Hezbollah will be disarmed, in turn reshuffle the balance of power between Shiite and Sunnis, and Lebanese people can Enditem.