

# *Foreign Affairs*

## **From Conflict Management to Conflict Resolution**

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### SPARKS AND ROOTS

The recent fighting in the Levant presents a fundamental challenge for U.S. policy toward the Middle East -- but also an opportunity to move from conflict management to conflict resolution. The United States should seize this moment to transform the cease-fire in the Hezbollah-Israeli conflict into a step toward a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement. Doing so would facilitate the marginalization of the forces of Islamic radicalism and enhance the prospects for regional security and political, economic, and social progress.

The Hezbollah-Israeli confrontation has further proved what should already have been painfully clear to all: there is no viable military solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Even with its military superiority, Israel cannot achieve security by force alone or by unilateral withdrawal from occupied territories. Nor can Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and similar groups destroy Israel. Peace can come only from negotiated agreements that bind both sides.

Hezbollah may have ignited the spark that set off this latest confrontation, but it is not the root cause. The fighting was the combined result of the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict and the struggle between the forces of moderation and those of extremism within the Muslim world -- two issues that are linked by the radicals' exploitation of the Arab-Israeli conflict for their own political ends. U.S. policy in the region should thus focus both on trying to promote a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute and on helping Muslim moderates by facilitating political and economic reform across the Middle East.

### THE NORTHERN FRONT

The crisis on the Israeli-Lebanese border this summer erupted in an already tense environment. On June 25, Hamas kidnapped an Israeli soldier, which reignited fighting on the Israeli-Palestinian front. When Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers on July 12,

it precipitated a strong Israeli military reaction, which, by his own admission, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah had not anticipated.

The Hezbollah-Israeli war lasted 34 days, with major Israeli incursions into Lebanon and the firing of some 4,000 Hezbollah rockets. The fighting resulted in major casualties (approximately 855 Lebanese and 159 Israelis killed), as well as large displacements of people on both sides of the border. Lebanon sustained economic and infrastructure damage estimated at \$3.9 billion, and the toll on Israel has been figured as running into the hundreds of millions.

When the hostilities began, the international community called for an immediate cease-fire, but the Bush administration held off, calling for a "sustainable" cease-fire instead. The Bush administration left the strong impression that it was giving Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government time to inflict serious damage on Hezbollah's infrastructure and personnel. Meanwhile, the administration and Israel clearly identified Iran and Syria as the main state supporters of Hezbollah's actions, and the danger of a wider regional conflict was not dismissed.

Eventually, the international community stepped in to stabilize southern Lebanon and prevent the crisis from escalating further. The parameters for international action had been set by UN Security Council Resolution 1559, passed in 2004, which called for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the disarmament of Hezbollah. Resolution 1701, passed on August 11 of this year, refers to the withdrawal of Israeli forces, the presence of a UN force, and the commitment of the government of Lebanon to extend its authority over its territory; it also takes note of proposals regarding the Shebaa Farms area. In other words, it provides the necessary framework to support the Lebanese government's development and the implementation of Beirut's plan to regain sovereign control over the whole country.

Still, an outside stabilization program is urgently required to help this happen. Such a program would need to include an agreement on a lasting and comprehensive cease-fire, the return of both Israeli and Arab hostages and prisoners, and an international support package involving economic, humanitarian, and security assistance for Lebanon. It would also need to contain realistic plans for deploying the Lebanese army to the south of the country, disarming Hezbollah, and preventing illicit arms shipments to Lebanon. And it would need to include a solution to the disagreements over the control and sovereignty of Shebaa Farms. The successful implementation of such a stabilization program would not just help resolve current tensions; it could also provide the basis for moving forward on negotiations for an Israeli-Lebanese peace agreement in the context of a comprehensive settlement.

Syria, meanwhile, poses both a danger and an opportunity. The Assad regime could undermine security arrangements in southern Lebanon, hinder progress in Iraq, and continue to support Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and radicals in Hamas. But it could also play a constructive role in the region -- a possibility that has yet to be fully explored. The Bush administration's engagement with the Syrians from 2003 to 2005 left

both sides frustrated. Washington felt that Damascus offered too little too late, and Damascus felt that Washington constantly increased its demands and refused to be satisfied. Nevertheless, ever since the 1991 Madrid peace conference, Damascus has looked to Washington as the key interlocutor between itself and Israel in negotiations over the return of the Golan Heights. The extensive talks that took place during the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton may not have resulted in a final agreement, but they came very close, hashing out the major issues of land, peace, security, and water.

The main problems on Israel's northern front now are Hezbollah and the inability of the government of Lebanon to exert authority throughout the entire country. Since Syria facilitates Hezbollah's access to arms and money, any sustainable solution in southern Lebanon would require Syria to be on board. Given Syria's historically special relationship with Lebanon, Damascus would not countenance a separate deal between Beirut and Jerusalem, and so the Israeli-Lebanese and the Israeli-Syrian negotiating tracks will have to proceed in parallel.

If Syria is Hezbollah's facilitator, Iran is its key ideological, political, and financial patron. Hezbollah is a grass-roots Lebanese Shiite political party and militia. Nasrallah and the party decide and manage local political, social, and cultural issues on their own, including tactical decisions on paramilitary operations against Israel. But the group recognizes the absolute political and religious authority of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, on doctrinal and strategic issues. Any sustainable agreement with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, therefore, would also have to involve Iran.

Dealing with Iran is problematic. Nevertheless, Washington and Tehran have engaged each other on Afghanistan (constructively), Iraq (less so), and the nuclear issue (as part of an international process). And although Iran sees it as being in its interest to have the United States suffer in Iraq, it does not want U.S. policy there to fail and the country to slip into full-scale civil war or territorial disintegration. Iran's population is just over half Persian, but almost a quarter of the population is Azerbaijani and a small part is Kurdish or Arab, making communal unrest a constant worry. Accordingly, the United States should consider dealing more directly with Iran on specific areas of interest, disavowing regime change as a specific goal and focusing on long-term policies to encourage and support political and economic liberalization and indigenous reform efforts there.

## THE PALESTINIAN FRONT

On the Israeli-Palestinian front, finally, it is critical to support and reengage Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) as the focal points of negotiations and move from managing the current fighting toward true conflict resolution.

Shortly before Hezbollah kidnapped the Israeli soldiers and triggered the recent fighting on the Israeli-Lebanese border, the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue had reached the beginning of a way out of that crisis. An understanding was being brokered by Egypt whereby the

Palestinians would commit to the safe release of the kidnapped Israeli corporal, Gilad Shalit, Qassam rocket attacks would stop, and a cease-fire would be declared and maintained. There were reliable reports that the Israelis were also prepared to release Palestinian prisoners to Abbas in return for the cease-fire.

The formation of a national unity government between Fatah and Hamas, which as of this writing seems possible, could be a step toward integrating Hamas into a more responsible government. The external wing of Hamas, led by Khaled Meshal in Damascus, has demonstrated a more militant and radical bent, while Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, who is from Hamas, and his colleagues inside the territories are struggling with the requirements of governing and have to consider difficult political compromises. U.S. policy should be sensitive to these political dynamics and encourage Hamas to move in a more moderate direction.

The Quartet -- the United States, the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations -- has laid out the requirements that Hamas recognize Israel's right to exist, give up terrorism, and respect all signed agreements. Hamas is basically being asked to do what other Arab governments have already done -- namely, accept all applicable UN resolutions and the Arab peace initiative issued at the Arab League summit in Beirut in 1992, which called for recognizing Israel in exchange for a comprehensive peace settlement. To move forward on the Palestinian track, the Quartet should now promote a clearly delineated multistaged approach toward resolving the political, security, and economic issues.

The political framework for Israeli-Palestinian peace is reiterated in the road map and its call for a two-state solution; the task now is to detail the unilateral and coordinated steps all sides must take before negotiations on a final peace settlement. Regarding security, the challenge is to help stabilize the Palestinian territories, reform and reorganize the Palestinian security services, disarm and integrate individual armed groups into the new security force structure, and establish central control by the PA over the use of force. In both the Palestinian and the Lebanese contexts, the success of disarmament and integration will ultimately be the product of political agreements.

And on the economic front, the international community must help promote reforms and avoid a humanitarian disaster in the Palestinian territories, particularly Gaza, by focusing on four key issues: the payment of monthly salaries to the PA's civil and police employees; the financing of health, education, and social programs for the population at large; covering the running costs of essential public institutions and municipal services; and the financing of infrastructure projects. Israel should also be encouraged, with all due consideration for its legitimate security needs, to increase the number of Palestinian workers inside its economy and facilitate the movement of goods across its borders.

## ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH

The extremists in the Muslim world today define the conflict with Israel as an existential one, using terms similar to those prevalent in the region half a century ago. The

moderates accept the possibility of a political settlement based on the principle of land for peace; for them, in other words, the issue is about Israel's borders, not about its existence. Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 (adopted in 1967 and 1973, respectively) embody this latter approach, and the United States should resume its traditional role of pressing for their implementation.

After the Yom Kippur War, in 1973, President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger led the effort to obtain the disengagement agreements between Israel, Syria, and Egypt. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter brought Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat together to sign the peace treaty between their two countries. In 1991, President George H. W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker led the effort to bring Israel and all of its immediate Arab neighbors together for the first time in direct negotiations in Madrid. President Clinton presided over the signing of the Oslo accords on the White House lawn in 1993, witnessed the signing of the 1994 peace treaty between Jordan and Israel, and made a major effort toward the end of his term in office that, while it did not lead to a signed agreement, defined the contours of an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. This track record proves that with strong presidential leadership, the United States can be an effective interlocutor between the Arabs and the Israelis.

President George W. Bush should therefore reiterate the vision of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement that he presented in June 2002, including his explicit call for a two-state solution involving a Palestinian state living in peace and security next to the state of Israel, and make it clear that he will work toward that end with the international community for the remainder of his presidency. This could give the parties in the region the political space they need to make the tough decisions and compromises for a negotiated peace. This thorough approach to peace, which would bring all the Arab and Israeli parties together to address the issues on the Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian fronts in a parallel manner, could be modeled after the Madrid peace conference of 1991.

All of the key issues in the Middle East -- the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, Iran, the need for regionwide political and economic reforms, extremism, and terrorism -- are inextricably linked. Nothing short of a comprehensive strategy can solve the problems, marginalize the radicals, and promote the values and interests of the United States and the parties in the region. Washington has waged war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The question now is whether it can muster the political will to wage peace as well.

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