

The Rogues Strike Back

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Iran thumbs its nose at Western diplomats and continues nuclear enrichment. Hamas's chief, speaking from Damascus, boasts about kidnapping an Israeli soldier. Hezbollah launches a cross-border raid, prompting Israeli retaliation in Beirut and a return volley of rockets on northern Israel. Just another bleak week in the hopeless Middle East? Regrettably, no. This one was different. This was the week the Dark Side went on the offensive.

Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hezbollah: These are not marginal fringe groups. The first two are sovereign states, the third forms the elected government of the Palestinian Authority, and the fourth holds 25 of the 128 seats in the Lebanese parliament and, effectively, two ministerial portfolios. This was the week that the rogue regimes of the "Old Middle East"—as opposed to the shadowy, faceless terrorist groups of the "New Middle East"—reminded the world that they too have the potential to grab headlines and wreak havoc.

Here's a recap: On Monday, July 10, Khaled Meshal, head of the political bureau of Hamas, held a news conference in Damascus in which he took full responsibility for the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, whom he called a "prisoner of war."

On Tuesday, July 11, Ali Larijani, Iran's top nuclear negotiator, told European Union envoy Javier Solana that Tehran was in no hurry to respond to a U.S.-European offer of incentives to end its nuclear enrichment program and would not give a formal reply until late August. Larijani then flew to Damascus, where he praised Hamas for its noble resistance to Zionist occupation.

On Wednesday, July 12, militiamen belonging to the Iranian-backed Hezbollah crossed the internationally recognized Israel-Lebanon frontier and attacked an Israeli position, killing eight soldiers and capturing two. This was "an act of war," said Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert, who authorized airstrikes on Beirut airport and Hezbollah facilities. Later that day, the United States and other permanent members asked the U.N. Security Council to compel Iran to suspend its nuclear enrichment activities. "We called [Iran's] bluff today," a senior State Department official told the Los Angeles Times.

On Thursday, July 13, Hezbollah rockets—supplied by Iran, via Syria—fell on major cities in northern Israel, including Haifa, Safed, Karmiel, and Nahariya, killing two, injuring dozens, and sending thousands to shelters. Israeli shelling shut down all civilian and military air access to Lebanon, as Israel continued bombing Hamas targets throughout Gaza, too. "All operations are legitimate to wipe out terror," said Israel's northern front commander Major General Udi Adam.

That's a lot of tough talk about war, face-offs, and showdowns, even for the Middle East, but what makes this train of events more worrisome than a typical week in the region is that these events—and their perpetrators—are all connected. No, this is not another Middle East conspiracy theory; to paraphrase Henry Kissinger's line about paranoids, sometimes bad guys shooting at you from all directions just might be in cahoots. In fact, the quartet of Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hezbollah constitutes a better oiled, more cohesive unit than the diplomatic quartet of the United States, the U.N., the E.U., and Russia. Indeed, the rogue foursome is linked ideologically and operationally in a much more organic way than the charter members of the Axis of Evil ever were.

The key, it is important to note, is not religion. Iran and Hezbollah are led by Shiite extremists; Hamas is the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, an international Sunni movement; and Syria is governed by the world's only remaining Baathist, a secular chieftan of the Alawite sect, which reviles (and is reviled by) Syria's majority Sunni community. A feverish brand of radical Islamism certainly inspires some of these actors, but what drives them together is politics.

A generation ago, before Hamas and Hezbollah ever existed, Hafez al-Assad's Syria and Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran forged an alliance born of their common fear and loathing of Saddam Hussein. When the collapse of the Soviet Union deprived Syria of its superpower patron, leaving it surrounded by NATO-ally Turkey, pro-West Jordan, and the same thug in Baghdad, Assad continued to reach out to Tehran to avoid isolation. For their part, the Iranians exploited the situation, using Syria as the staging ground from which to build Hezbollah into their instrument for exporting the Islamic revolution.

In recent years, Hamas's success has been manna from heaven to the Iranians, Syrians, and Hezbollahis. Though these Palestinian Islamists fought and won their own battles against the more secular Fatah, Hamas's partners in the rogue quartet were perfectly happy to reap the benefits of a new front in their proxy war against Israel.

Today, these four—two states, one near-state, and one state-within-a-state—are collectively motivated by opportunity, not fear. The opportunity arises partly because the hated Saddam Hussein is gone, replaced by a weak, terrorist-wracked Shiite-led Iraqi government, propped up by a bleeding America. But each of these actors has its own reasons for exultation and brinkmanship.

Through Iranian eyes, the fact that the West has imposed no price for twenty years of lying about its nuclear program, but instead is still willing to offer ever-greater incentives, must seem remarkable. Only a preening sense of self-confidence can explain Iran's insouciant attitude toward the U.S.-E.U. offer. Indeed, U.S. and other Western diplomats who were dismayed at Iran's failure to respond to the package of carrots failed to recognize that Iran did respond, through what Clausewitz would have called diplomacy by other means: upping the ante via Hezbollah. With the threat of any meaningful U.N. sanctions months away, the Iranians took the initiative. Their goal is to make Israel just another item on the nuclear bargaining table with the West.

Through Syrian eyes, the fact that the West, operating through the U.N., appears less likely today than at any point in the past year to impose a price on the Assad family for its role in murdering former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri must seem similarly stunning. Only a robust sense of optimism can explain Syria's brutal crackdown on secular reformers and liberal dissidents at home and its ongoing efforts to silence critics—like the courageous journalist Gibran Tuani, assassinated in December 2005—in Lebanon next door. Last week, Syria's accidental president, Assad's son Bashar, evidently looked at the rising price the West was willing to pay Iran to stop its objectionable behavior and decided he wants to get into the game. But, lacking significant oil revenues, he chose the poor man's blackmail of terrorism. Hence Syria's brazen decision to break the fiction of its nonsupport to terrorists by providing Khaled Meshal with a Damascus soapbox to boast of his terrorist deeds.

Through Hezbollah's eyes, the failure of the West to implement U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559—which demands the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon and calls on the Lebanese government to exercise sovereignty up to the border with Israel—nicely fits its view of the Jewish state as weak, brittle, and impotent. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has likened it to a "spider web." Only an unswerving sense of ideological purpose can explain Hezbollah's willingness to ridicule its own role as a Lebanese political party serving in the Lebanese government by taking actions that rain Israeli retaliation down upon the heads of fellow Lebanese.

And through Hamas's eyes, the fact that the West, including Israel and the United States, permitted a terrorist organization committed to the destruction of the Jewish state to take over the reins of government in the Palestinian Authority—an entity whose only *raison d'être* is to be an instrument of peacemaking—is surely proof of divine intercession. Hamas's attack against the Israeli position at Kerem Shalom occurred just before the Europeans were set to launch a humanitarian aid program that would have dulled the impact of the U.S.-led financial quarantine on the PA, and just after Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas fell into the trap of endorsing a political platform, known as the Prisoners Document, that in large respects mirrored Hamas's own "solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only a steadfast conviction in the rightness of the battle against the Zionist entity could compel Hamas leaders to forgo these advantages in exchange for the Israeli reoccupation of parts of Gaza.

Virtually overnight, an audacious Hamas raid has metastasized into a crisis that holds the greatest potential for regional conflagration in years. On a strategic level, the rogues' goal is almost surely to fuse the disparate crises into one—merging either the Hamas or Hezbollah front with Iran's nuclear standoff with the West, perhaps by the transfer of the captive soldiers to Iranian control, by direct involvement of Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the rocket fire against Israel, or by some other means.

If that happens, then Hamas and its fellow quartet members may achieve what Yasser Arafat was not able to accomplish with two intifadas—to regionalize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and thereby radically alter the strategic balance. And if Iran is able to exploit this crisis to show that its nuclear program earns it and its allies special treatment on the terrorism front, Tehran will have proven precisely how beneficial the decision to invest in a nuclear program really was. As the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan*, close to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, editorialized last Thursday, "Nuclear Iran is eradicating the nuclear prestige of Israel." That's the sort of rising star to which Syria would like to be hitched.

In Gaza and Lebanon, a battle between Israel and two of its enemies has now been joined. Its spread to two other enemies—Iran and Syria—is a stark and urgent possibility. Let us not mistake this conflict for a local skirmish, a pesky diversion from more serious business, like stopping Iran's nuclear program or building a free, stable Iraq. On the contrary, it is all of a piece.

Defeat for Israel—either on the battlefield or via coerced compromises to achieve flawed cease-fires—is a defeat for U.S. interests; it will inspire radicals of every stripe, release Iran and Syria to spread more mayhem inside Iraq, and make more likely our own eventual confrontation with this emboldened alliance of extremists. Victory—in the form of Hezbollah's disarmament, the expulsion of the Iranian military presence from Lebanon, the eviction of Meshal and friends from Damascus, and the demise of the Hamas government in Gaza—is, by the same token, also a victory for U.S. (and Western) interests.

Achieving those successes—and avoiding those setbacks—will take time, persistence, and leadership. While military force is essential, nonmilitary measures are needed too. These include organizing transatlantic consensus on economic and political pressure on Syria, devising a fast-executing international mechanism to disarm Hezbollah, and expediting the Security Council process on Iran. As enervating as it must be to an administration whose policy plate already overflows with tough problems, none of this can happen without America taking the lead.

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