

The Next Mideast War?

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May 3, 2007

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The scathing interim report issued this week by an Israeli panel that reviewed the decisions leading to the country's war with Hezbollah last summer may spell doom for Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's leadership. Calls for his resignation have mounted even within his own party. However, the real story is that the causes of last year's war still exist -- and may spark another conflagration.

The first underlying issue is the failure to enforce U.N. resolutions. Israel resorted to military action last July largely because the United Nations and the international community did nothing to implement U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559 (passed in 2004) or Resolution 1680 (passed in 2006), which made clear that Hezbollah should disband and be disarmed. Israel was left to fend for itself after Hezbollah crossed a U.N.-demarcated line, killed three soldiers and kidnapped two soldiers it still has not released.

The end of the war led to the passage of Security Council Resolution 1701, which deployed thousands of U.N. peacekeepers to southern Lebanon. The presence of such forces there has constrained Hezbollah, even though the peacekeepers have not attempted to disarm Hezbollah fighters. However, a key provision of the resolution -- an international embargo to prevent weaponry from entering Lebanon -- has not been met. Just two weeks ago the Security Council voiced concern that this resolution has not been implemented fully. It has been widely reported that arms from Syria are being smuggled into Lebanon, and Israeli officials say that Hezbollah is hiding Syrian-manufactured 220mm rockets just beyond the jurisdiction of the peacekeepers but within range of northern Israel. There is open speculation in Israel and Lebanon about the possibility of the conflict resuming this summer.

Two other factors add fuel to the fire. First, Syria is colluding with Hezbollah to destabilize the Lebanese government, fearing Beirut's commitment to prosecuting the killers of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, the beloved leader slain in February 2005.

Second, in an eerie echo of the run-up to the 1967 war, U.S. and Israeli officials say Moscow is once again telling Damascus that Israel has plans to attack Syria. Israeli security officials say that Syria's new military deployments reflect this Russian advice. Concerned that such a deployment might dangerously turn from defensive to offensive, Olmert took the unusual step of declaring last month that Israel has no desire to start a war with Syria. But the prospects for miscalculation remain high. Syria believes that Israel sees war as a means of regaining a deterrent that was weakened last summer, and Israel believes that Syria sees its relationship with Iran and Hezbollah as a winning

combination.

On top of all this, Hamas's approach to a cease-fire in Gaza is one of observation, not enforcement. Specifically, Hamas has done nothing to halt the firing of more than a thousand Qassam rockets from Gaza, which Israel evacuated from in 2005, into southern Israel over the past year, and last week it publicly asserted responsibility for some such attacks. The cease-fire has never been defined, so there are no obligations constraining the Israelis or Palestinians. It is worth recalling that Hezbollah's provocative attack last summer was staged in sympathy: It kidnapped two soldiers after Hamas kidnapped Israeli Cpl. Gilad Shalit last June.

Amid all these problems, and given Olmert's teetering position and the Arab League's insistence after its March summit in Riyadh that its peace plan is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition, it is hard to believe that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will succeed in negotiating a "political horizon" -- namely, fleshing out guiding principles that would govern a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- until the Israeli political situation stabilizes and there is greater clarity about and a moderate direction to the Palestinian "unity government."

This situation does not argue for U.S. passivity. Rather, Rice should lead an international coalition to defuse multiple looming crises in Arab-Israeli arenas. The international community can and should agree to follow up U.N. Resolution 1701 with one involving the deployment of U.N. peacekeeping troops on the Syrian-Lebanese border. Avoiding another outbreak of violence could make Rice's political horizon a more likely possibility once the Israeli leadership crisis eases.

The writer, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, directs the institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process. ❖

Washington Post

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