

Roll Back

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Articles & Testimony

Conspiracy is like oxygen in the Middle East. Everyone breathes it. And it's a mode of thought suited to understanding Hezbollah's attacks on Israel. The attacks, after all, represented a sudden shift in the group's thinking. In the six years following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, the Shia militants didn't cross the blue line—the recognized international border separating Israel from Lebanon. When they launched attacks, they did so in disputed areas like the Sheba farms. Hezbollah seemed to realize that it could only go so far before provoking international opprobrium. Then, last week, Hezbollah changed its posture. It did so in a way certain to bring pain and suffering to Lebanon. This fact is itself interesting. Hezbollah, until now, has branded itself as a protector of the Lebanese people, not the representatives of a foreign agenda.

That self-image is no longer tenable. Many Arab (and non-Arab) observers see an Iranian hand guiding Hezbollah. Isn't it interesting, they ask, that Hezbollah's attacks coincided with the deadline the European Union set for Iranians to respond to its proposed nuclear deal? What better way to show that Iran can make life difficult for those who pressure it that to create a broad crisis in the region?

If you buy this reading of events, you must accept a certain irony. It is fashionable in some quarters to say that U.S. identification with Israel produces hostility against us in the Islamic world. But, in actuality, Israel may be paying a price for the U.S.-led effort to pressure Iran to give up its nuclear aspirations.

Those who view the Israeli offensive in Lebanon as counterproductive to U.S. foreign policy miss an emerging reality: Iran is waging a struggle to achieve regional dominance that threatens the United States and all its friends in the Middle East. The good news is that Hezbollah has unmasked Iran's intentions, which even Arab leaders now appear to recognize. As such, with the right U.S. steps, the current crisis may be turned into an opportunity.

How has Hezbollah exposed Iranian intentions? If Israel were still in Lebanon, perhaps Hezbollah could claim it was resisting Israeli occupation. But Israel ended that occupation, and the Iranians stepped up the supply of katyushas and surface-to-surface rockets—approximately 13,000, according to the Israelis. It is hard to escape the conclusion that Iran saw value in provoking an indirect conflict with Israel at the time of its choosing. In this, Iran is strangely mimicking its old nemesis, Saddam Hussein, who responded to the onset of the Gulf War—a war designed to expel Iraq from Kuwait—by launching missiles against Israel. Much like Saddam before them, the Iranians believe they can

mobilize the Arab world against the United States by playing on the sense of grievance that is so deeply embedded among many against Israel.

The last thing that Iran wants is for that grievance to disappear. No wonder that, during my time as the American negotiator, we were constantly aware of Iranian pressure on Hamas and Islamic Jihad to initiate acts of terrorism in Israel. And that was when we had a peace process. We have not had once since 2001, but, at moments of promise—if only for quiet—it is Iran that pushes the hardest to make sure the quiet does not last. Only last week, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak asserted that he had arranged a deal for the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, but “other parties” undercut the deal. Shalit’s release would have helped end the siege of Gaza—and much Palestinian suffering—but that wouldn’t serve Iran’s interests.

I don’t mean to excuse Syria. In the past, they suggested that only low-level Hamas functionaries reside in their country. But, last week, Khaled Meshal, the real leader of Hamas, held a press conference in a Damascus hotel, announcing that he was the man to talk to about Shalit’s release. No reason to keep Hamas hidden; no reason to be fearful; no reason to think that Syria would pay a price for Hamas’s actions.

In the end, this conflict is not about Israel. True, Israel may be a foil, but Iran has bigger fish to fry. Hezbollah and Hamas are tools in the Iranian game of self-promotion, furthering an Islamist agenda, and undoing Western influence in the area. The Syrians, for their part, seem to believe that Iran is on a roll, and better to be playing along with it than with others, and they clearly see little price for doing so.

Today, Israel and the United States are on the same side facing the same threat. But they are not the only ones under threat. Every non-Islamist regime in the area is ultimately a target. Iran seeks to exploit anger in the area against the United States and Israel for the occupation of Iraqis and Palestinians. To be sure, they don’t create the sense of grievance, but they are determined to fuel it. Only this time, with Hezbollah, they may have miscalculated. Hezbollah does not command an instinctive following throughout a largely Sunni Arab world.

When Hezbollah was fighting Israeli “occupation,” it was untouchable. But the general Arab narrative has been that the violence, meaning terrorism, is driven by occupation: no occupation, no violence. Hamas has already cast doubt on this narrative by launching attacks from Gaza after the Israeli withdrawal, but it is hard for Arab regimes to challenge Hamas’s legitimacy. Hezbollah, however, is another story. Saudi Arabia has taken the lead in denying that Hezbollah’s act represented “resistance”—hallowed in Arab psychology—and declared it “reckless.” Then, over the weekend, at the Arab League, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al Faisal—hardly a paragon of unscripted language—called Hezbollah’s actions “unexpected, inappropriate, and irresponsible.” He told his counterparts, “These acts will pull the whole region back to years ago, and we cannot simply accept them.” The foreign minister’s remarks were then endorsed by Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and the Palestinian Authority. (The Palestinian Authority represented Mahmoud Abbas, not the Hamas-led cabinet.) In Lebanon, you could hear similar noises. Walid Jumblatt and other parliamentarians asked what gave a party (Hezbollah) the right to commit the country to war, with all its attendant costs.

As Israel carries on its campaign to damage Hezbollah and hold the Lebanese government accountable, it needs to be mindful of this potentially strategic development among the Arabs. Neither the Arab world nor the international community will give Israel a blank check for military action. Israel needs to walk a fine line: to inflict a devastating blow against Hezbollah’s infrastructure without so substantially damaging Lebanese infrastructure and killing Lebanese civilians that it diverts attention from Hezbollah and onto itself. This is easier to say than to do, especially when Hezbollah rockets are hidden in the basements of apartment buildings and continue to kill Israeli civilians. But, ultimately, as I discovered in helping to broker the 1993 and 1996 understandings that ended Israeli-Hezbollah battles, Israel cannot stop the katyushas.

This time, however, Israel may have some silent partners, at least in Lebanon. It is not only Israel that may demand the Lebanese army assume positions along the border, something that the Lebanese government was required to do, according to U.N. Security Council Resolution 425. The Arab world may join in making this possible, determined to prevent Hezbollah from being able to repeat this scenario in six months' time.

Israel will demand this as an outcome, since it will not accept the preexisting status quo vis-à-vis Hezbollah or Hamas. Israel is now trying to reestablish its deterrent. Withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza were interpreted as signs of weakness, and a new Israeli government is now acting to prove that, if you attack Israel, you pay a terrible price.

The United States has an interest in seeing that deterrent reestablished. It is necessary if there is to be relative calm between Arabs and Israelis. It is necessary if, at some point, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is to pursue his desire to fix Israel's borders. (The lesson about the withdrawals is now clear: They can't be strictly unilateral. Obligations must flow in two directions. Israel can declare its readiness to leave most of the West Bank, but, if Palestinians want Israeli withdrawal, they must prove they will assume security responsibilities.) Reestablishing the Israeli deterrent is also necessary as part of the struggle with Iran and its proxies. They have provoked these twin conflicts, and they must not be seen as gaining from them. This is part of a larger struggle, and Islamists must begin to lose their swagger; they must be discredited and their more secular opponents must begin to gain. We want models of success on the non-Islamist side, and it may be that Hezbollah's action, so clearly serving a non-Lebanese agenda, is a wake-up call for a large part of the Arab world.

Perhaps it will also be a wake-up call for the Bush administration. Outside of Iraq, we sit on the sidelines. We inspire no fear in Syria or Iran today; Syria need not be a proxy for the Iranians. But our warnings mean nothing to them because there is never a consequence. It seems remarkable to say it, but several years into the war in Iraq, most in the area expect very little of us, or worse, dismiss our statements.

We need to become a factor again. It is time for us to take a leading role in ending this crisis, recognizing who must not gain and understanding that, with much of the Arab world lined up on the right side, we have something important to work with. Statecraft is about identifying when a crisis can be turned into an opportunity. Remaining on the sidelines is likely to turn one more opportunity into a lost cause.

Former Ambassador Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. ❖

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