

Casus Belli

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Articles & Testimony

For years, we were told that the “root cause” of the Middle East’s problems was the Israeli occupation of Arab lands—the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and southern Lebanon. Peace would come to the Middle East, according to this view, only when Israel finally retreated to its 1967 borders.

The “root cause” theory always had plenty of holes. But never has it looked quite so naïve and simplistic as it does this week. The present crisis was initiated—in Gaza by Hamas and in southern Lebanon by Hezbollah—from lands that are not under Israeli occupation. Perhaps, then, it is time to consider whether the conflict is the result of different “root causes”: namely, Iran, Syria, and the radical Islamists they sponsor. After all, Iran has offered financial support to the Hamas-led government in Palestine; Syria has sheltered Hamas leaders, allowing them to order terrorist attacks against Israelis from the safety of Damascus; and both countries have, for years, used Hezbollah as a terrorist arm of their respective foreign policies. Theirs is a unique partnership in which Iran plays the mastermind, Syria plays the facilitator, and two violent groups do the actual killing. Only when these states and their terrorist proxies are defeated will the Middle East finally know peace.

The beginning point for this conflict was not the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Nor was it the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza after a defensive war. Rather, it came 27 years ago, when Iranian revolutionaries began to inspire, and later assist, radicals throughout the world, including the leaders of Hezbollah and Hamas.

That assistance has peaked in recent years. Hezbollah is equipped with a variety of Iranian rockets, and, according to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the missile that hit an Israeli warship last week was launched from Lebanon by members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Farther south, Palestinian terrorists have received Iranian money and weapons, which have been smuggled—under the not-so-watchful eyes of Egyptian authorities—into the Gaza Strip.

What, exactly, is Iran hoping to accomplish by sponsoring this violence? The radical Shia regime of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wants three things: to establish hegemony over a Muslim world long wracked by internecine religious and ethnic conflicts; to severely curtail American power; and, ultimately, to provoke the return of the Hidden Imam, the central figure of Shia eschatology, and thereby usher in a Muslim messianic age. To achieve these goals, Iran is willing to support just about any terrorist organization that will confront the West; but goading Hezbollah and Hamas to attack Israel suits Iran’s strategic mission especially well. For one thing, targeting Israel signals Iranian strength to the Muslim populations worldwide that the mullahs hope to lead. For another, Iran sees the destruction of Israel as a means of neutering—or even as a prelude to destroying—the United States. Ahmadinejad himself has gone so far as to refer to “a world without America.” When the Iranian president denies the Holocaust or when he calls for Israel to be wiped from the map, we tend to see him as a ridiculous figure. In fact, Ahmadinejad appears quite serious about using Iranian foreign policy to serve the purposes of Shia eschatology. This explains his desire to bring the conflict between Islam and the West into a new, belligerent phase—which, in turn, explains why rockets are falling this week on Israeli cities.

Ahmadinejad and his allies have good reasons to think their plan is working. Islamists take credit for pushing the

United States out of Lebanon in 1984, the Soviets out of Afghanistan in 1989, the Israelis out of Lebanon in 2000, the Spanish out of Iraq in 2004, and the Israelis out of Gaza in 2005. Now they believe they are close to pushing the Americans out of Iraq as well. That Iran has often paid no price for its transgressions—the 1983 bombing of U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon; the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Argentina; the torture and imprisonment of thousands of dissidents; the continuous violation of international understandings related to its nuclear program—has only emboldened Islamists worldwide, fueling a perception among radicals that the West is simply afraid of confronting them.

Syria, for its part, may not be an Islamist state, but its leader, Bashar Assad, clings to power through the manipulation of anti-Western sentiment. An alliance with Iran is, therefore, in his interest. Like Iran's mullahs, he has paid no penalty for his numerous sins—the assassination of Rafik Hariri in Lebanon; the ruthless suppression of dissidents in his own country; the use of Syrian soil as a safe haven for terrorist operations against coalition forces in Iraq; the shelter granted to leaders of terrorist groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad; and so on. The regime feels so confident in its immunity from American or Israeli attack that it allowed Hamas leader Khaled Meshal to hold a press conference in Damascus celebrating the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier—even as Hamas leaders in Palestine were rushing to distance themselves from the abduction.

All of this does not necessarily mean that Israel will have to fight a war with Syria and Iran. But it does mean that the West will have to take strong measures to block both countries from continuing to project their power—and to demonstrate to Islamists worldwide that sponsorship of terrorism invites severe penalties. The Israeli operations in Lebanon and Gaza are a first step to achieving this end, but they are not, by themselves, enough to finish the job.

First, the West should insist on the implementation of U.N. Security Council resolution 1559, which requires the dismantling of all armed militias in Lebanon. Next, the West should impose the strongest possible regime of economic and political sanctions on Iran and Syria. Tehran and Damascus must be made to understand that sponsoring terrorism does not pay.

These steps—combined with ongoing Israeli strikes against Hamas—will diminish the power of radical elements in Gaza and the West Bank. Iranian influence in the Palestinian territories has been on the rise lately, but, with Iranian proxies evicted from Lebanon, it will become more difficult for the mullahs to aid Palestinian terrorists. In addition, Hamas will see that the international community is resolute in its determination to punish terrorist activity. Perhaps pragmatic Palestinian leaders will therefore think twice about drawing even closer to Syria and Iran.

This crisis offers the West an opportunity to revise its thinking on the Middle East. The question of where Israel ends up setting its permanent borders can no longer be seen as the underlying cause of regional mayhem. That distinction belongs to Syria, Iran, and their radical Islamist proxies. Hemming their power is the best chance Israel and the West have of preventing further bloodshed—and of cutting off terrorism at its real roots.

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