

Not Only Israel Is Opposed to a Ceasefire

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Jul 20, 2006

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The United States has made it clear that it is providing Israel with the requisite political breathing space to obtain its military objectives in Lebanon. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has delayed her mediation mission, and President Bush has not pressed Israel to end its military operations at this time. Israel is not the only player eschewing an immediate cease-fire. The lack of an international call for an unconditional immediate cease-fire is not coincidental, but can be interpreted as a broader understanding on how this conflict should end, and the time it takes to get there.

There are a few reasons for this. A meaningless cease-fire, one which does not ensure that the Lebanese-Israeli border area is controlled by the Lebanon Armed Forces (LAF)—perhaps augmented by a credible international force—will only create the conditions for the next conflict. Past clashes have ended with anywhere from partial to meaningless cease-fires along the Lebanese-Israeli border during the last 31 years, which coincides with the time that the Lebanese government's loss of central authority as it was forced to cede the border area to radical elements.

A key part of the problem has been Syria, which occupied Lebanon from 1976 until 2005 and thwarted any control by Lebanon's armed forces, fomenting instead instability and radicalism. Israel ended its unhappy 18-year presence in southern Lebanon in 2000 and does not want to return to an Israeli buffer zone. This is Lebanon's first crisis since the Syrians and Israelis have left. Now there is a chance that has not existed for decades. History does not always afford second chances.

There is understanding both in the United States and beyond about both the problem and the solution. First, the case for Israeli military action is straightforward: self-defense. Israel suffered an unprovoked attack across an internationally recognized border. It was provoked by Hezbollah, a group that freely admits it does not recognize Israel within any borders anywhere.

Second, the regional stakes are high. Hezbollah and Hamas, and their supporters in Iran and Syria, have no interest in a democratic Palestinian state in the West Bank, nor in a democratic state in Lebanon. This is recognized by the key Arab states and European states, none of whom is clamoring for an unconditional cease-fire, even if their citizens might not like the Israeli offensive.

Saudi, Egyptian and Jordanian leaders took the unprecedented step of blaming Hezbollah for the crisis as they

understand that it should not end with Hamas and its supporters in Syria and Iran emerging victorious. They understand that Hezbollah should be deprived of rockets that could ignite the Middle East at their whim. The dozens of Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who train Hezbollah fighters, should also be expelled from Lebanon.

Top U.S. officials knew a premature cease-fire during the air campaign in Bosnia was counter-productive. President Bill Clinton, Secretary of State Warren Christopher and negotiator Richard Holbrooke were opposed, wrote Derek Chollet in his compelling book, “The Road to the Dayton Accords,” for which he interviewed all three key players. Christopher told Chollet, “I thought it was important to carry on the bombing campaign to the point where it would achieve real effectiveness and that the Bosnian Serbs would be impressed with the willingness of NATO to bomb on a continuous basis,” he said.

Of course, the Israeli military has no interest to act in an unlimited fashion, nor obviously should it, as all civilian collateral damage needs to be kept to an absolute minimum. Apart from its own moral compass, Israel knows the political risk of a misfired attack. An attack in the southern Lebanon village of Kana killed about 100 civilians, and led to the collapse of Israel’s 1996 Grapes of Wrath operation.

Israel’s own military leaders say, today, that they need to continue the bombing for another one to two weeks.

This does not mean that the United States should be diplomatically idle during this time. The United States can begin quietly lining up the G8 members, the United Nations and Arab states around this objective of having the Lebanese armed forces deploy in the southern part of Lebanon for first time in 31 years with supplementary assistance from an international force that could deny Hezbollah of its ability to launch missiles at will. It was the same multilateral effort spearheaded by the United States and France that triggered the ouster of Syria from Lebanon over the last two years. An Arab imprimatur would be helpful in this regard. Such an international package could provide military, economic and reconstruction assistance to the government of Lebanon.

The lack of an international groundswell for an immediate cease-fire for its military objective against Hezbollah means key players know artificial Band-Aids of the past are futile. It is hoped that the United States can galvanize the will of the broader international community and link it to a realistic political strategy that gives new hope to both the Lebanese and Israeli peoples.

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San Francisco Chronicle

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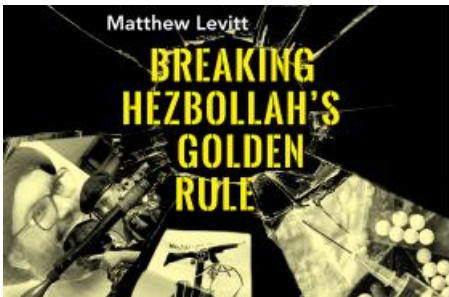
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