

U.S. Should Help Construct an 'Arab Umbrella'

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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As someone who helped to negotiate an end to the Israeli-Hezbollah battles in 1993 and '96, when Katyusha rockets forced the public in northern Israel into bomb shelters and the Israeli military destroyed Lebanese infrastructure and forced Lebanese to flee the south, I can say that the Lebanese crisis is unlikely to be resolved without the Syrians deciding to bring it to an end. Israel will not be able to stop Katyusha fire on its own; it could not in 1993 or '96, and today, the Iranians have supplied Hezbollah with as many as 13,000 such rockets.

In one of those paradoxes that so often seem to characterize the Middle East, Hamas and Hezbollah have acted to provoke an Israeli reoccupation of Gaza and extensive military operations in Lebanon. Israel might not want to be in either place, but with cross-border attacks and kidnapped Israeli soldiers, Israelis feel the need to impose a price and show such attacks come with consequences.

The problem, of course, is that for Israel it is much easier to get into Gaza and Lebanon than to get out. And that does not seem to bother either Hamas or Hezbollah. Though both claim to oppose Israeli occupation, Israeli withdrawal denies them their basis for resistance. Now with Israel back in Gaza and acting militarily in Lebanon, they have something to fight. For these Islamists, it is the cause, not humanity, that matters. And while they have always been sensitive to the public mood and support, the impact of Palestinian and Lebanese public opinion will play less of a role in ending these crises because of the pervading influence of Iran and Syria.

As the primary financier and supplier of Hezbollah and a patron of Hamas, Iran enjoys demonstrating to the Europeans and others the costs to regional stability if it faces continued pressure on nuclear issues, and it will try to manipulate these crises for its benefit.

Despite Iran's role, it is Syria that will determine how long these crises continue. In the case of Hamas, its external leadership operate and enjoy sanctuary in Damascus; should Syrian President Bashar Assad threaten to expel Hamas from Damascus if it does not release Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and stop the rocket fire out of Gaza, the crisis would end quickly.

Similarly, in Lebanon, while Hezbollah is largely financed and armed by Iran, it is Syria that has always prevented the Lebanese army from acting to disarm Hezbollah and extending its presence to the border—the ultimate key to ending the current conflict.

Syria will take none of the actions necessary to defuse these crises without facing pointed international pressure. Assad, like his father before him, does nothing for free. He sees Hamas and Hezbollah as “cards” to be used and traded. While one might think the United States has leverage on Syria, Assad does not believe it. Throughout its first term, the Bush administration’s rhetoric was tough toward Syria, especially on its open-door policy for jihadists transiting to Iraq, but there weren’t meaningful consequences. Syrian leaders must understand what they will lose by continuing their destructive behavior and what they can gain by ending it. If we don’t find a way of altering the Syrian calculus, Israelis could do so through military action into Syria.

If a wider war is to be averted and if the current crisis is to be brought to an end—in a way that prevents Hezbollah and Hamas from simply resuming conflict at a point of their choosing—the United States will need to take advantage of a strategically important new reality.

The Saudis, Egyptians, Jordanians and others seem to recognize that Iran is manipulating Hezbollah and Hamas for its purposes, and they appreciate the threat that poses not just to Israel and the United States but to non-Islamist Arab governments as well. Tough Saudi criticism of Hezbollah’s “reckless” behavior is unprecedented and an indication of what the Saudis and others feel is at stake.

Now is the time for the United States to work with those who could create an “Arab umbrella” for bolstering the Lebanese government, its prime minister, Fuad Saniora, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Such an Arab umbrella could justify, support and assist in deploying the Lebanese army to Israel’s border.

Helping to establish security on the Lebanese-Israeli border and the Israeli-Gaza border in a way that ends rocket fire from areas that Israel has left might not only end the current crisis but also pave the way to a more hopeful future.

Dennis Ross is counselor at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. He was U.S. envoy to the region under presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush. ❖

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