

Avoiding a War

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Articles & Testimony

After eight years of Herculean effort to build Arab-Israeli peace, President Clinton faces the cruel irony that the level of violence in the Middle East may be higher when he leaves office than when he entered it. The region not only faces the prospect of the collapse of the peace process but may be on the verge of wider conflict and perhaps even war. The situation is critical. Israel faces a three-front crisis--with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; with Arab citizens inside Israel proper; and, following Hezbollah's cross-border raid and kidnapping of three Israeli soldiers, a state-to-state confrontation with Syria and Lebanon, the radical Islamic group's patron and host, respectively. Israel's likely response is the establishment of a "national emergency government" joining Labor's Ehud Barak and Likud's Ariel Sharon.

But that's not all. In recent days, Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority has reached common ground with its Islamic opposition, Hamas, such that dozens of convicted Hamas operatives have been released from Palestinian Authority jails, and Hamas leaders have been accorded extensive air time on Palestinian television to call for jihad. Combined with the efforts now underway in Iran to coordinate action among Hamas, Hezbollah and the smaller but even more extreme Islamic Jihad, the potential for a return to the mass terrorism of the mid-1990s is chillingly real. Then there is the dimension no one wants to talk about: Iraq. Last week, Saddam Hussein told a Baghdad audience that if the Arabs gave him a parcel of land bordering Israel from which to operate, he would "eradicate Zionism." With no arms inspections in Iraq in more than two years, can we be confident that the last man to fire ballistic missiles against Israel might not today have the capability to do even worse?

Even on the political front, the situation is worse than it seems. In Jordan, the new, young monarch, King Abdullah, has been forced to order anti-riot troops to fire tear gas against thousands of Palestinian protesters; how long he can remain supportive of his six-year-old peace treaty against this rising tide is unknown. And in Egypt, Hosni Mubarak has begun to organize the first Arab League summit in a decade, a meeting whose bellicosity is sure to set back years of quiet efforts to build diplomatic and commercial ties between Israel and a dozen Arab states.

The death of the peace process and the descent to war are not foreordained. But it will require a resolute White House, willing to talk tough, and act tougher, to prevent further conflict and resurrect the principle that diplomacy is the sole route to resolving disputes. So far, however, the administration has been neither resolute nor tough. Its decision on Saturday to acquiesce in the passage of a U.N. Security Council resolution that first condemns Israeli

actions and then supports an inquiry to find out what happened was bad policy. It could not but whet Yasser Arafat's appetite for further clashes as a means to achieve diplomatic gains and, in the process, hurt Israel's deterrent posture. That it happened on the day that Palestinians destroyed a Jewish holy site in Nablus and that Hezbollah brazenly flouted the five-month-old U.N. Security Council regime along the Lebanon-Israel border makes it shameful, too.

But there still may be time to put the brakes on the worsening situation. On the Palestinian front, the president needs to elicit a clear, public and unqualified commitment from Arafat to end violence and to use the considerable Palestinian security forces at his disposal to prevent its recurrence. Arafat must know that his relationship with the United States, perhaps his most important political ally, is at risk. To make the point, the White House should announce that it no longer opposes legislation now before the Senate threatening sanctions against the Palestinians, including a cutoff of economic aid, in the event of a unilateral declaration of independence. Arafat would get the message.

On the Lebanese-Syrian front, the president needs to join with Israel in holding Syria ultimately responsible for the captured soldiers and by offering public support to whatever moves Israel chooses to gain their release. To address the continuing problem of Hezbollah terrorism, the United States should demand that Syria disarm the Hezbollah militia and that the Lebanese armed forces deploy in strength along the international border with Israel. These demands should be affirmed in a speedy U.N. Security Council resolution. Until it is fully implemented, the United States should suspend aid to Beirut, oppose international reconstruction efforts for southern Lebanon and announce a review of antiterrorist sanctions against Damascus with an eye toward their enhancement.

On the wider Arab front, the president needs to remind Egypt's Mubarak and other leaders such as Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah that their interests are served through calm, not tension. As the Saudis' main protector and the Egyptians' leading donor, Washington has some means to convince them that a heads-of-state summit is a bad idea worth postponing. And toward Iraq, the administration needs to be clear: The threat or use of weapons of mass destruction against Israel, Kuwait or anyone else would trigger a regime-ending response. None of this addresses more fundamental problems, such as putting the Oslo Humpty Dumpty back together again or removing the Saddam bogeyman from the region's political calculus, once and for all. But it may help prevent the one October Surprise nobody expected--a Middle East at war.

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