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*for International Peace*

## **CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

This is a dangerous moment for the Middle East, because the conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon could easily escalate to involve the broader region. Indeed, there are voices in the United States and Israel calling for a deliberate broadening of the conflict to Syria and Iran in an attempt to solve all the contentious issues of the region at once.

We believe that this is an illusion. Any strategy to address the present crisis must deal with the realities of the Middle East as they are now, not try to leapfrog over them by seeking to impose a grand new vision. Such a vision would be bound to fail as it did in the case of Iraq.

The following commentaries by members of the Carnegie Endowment's Middle East Program highlight realities the administration should not ignore. They reflect the different and sometimes conflicting views of the individual authors, rather than an overall position of the Program. One common point emerges clearly from all the analyses, however: the crisis cannot be solved by a single grand strategy that would broaden the conflict to Syria or even Iran and would change the face of the Middle East forever. As in all other crises in the Middle East, at the heart of the problem is the difficult task of negotiating coexistence in a small, overpopulated, and resource-poor part of the world among population groups that have strong identities, different cultures, conflicting interests, and seemingly irreconcilable goals. No grand strategy will alter this most fundamental of Middle East realities.

Marina Ottaway  
Director, Middle East Program

## **UNDERSTANDING LEBANON**

### **The Predicament of the Lebanese Government**

Paul Salem  
Director-designate, Carnegie Middle East Center

The contradiction in the strategies pursued by the postwar governments led by Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri throughout the 1990s and by Hizbollah was significant. Hariri pursued a strategy of reconstruction, development, tourism, and investment that relied on domestic security and stability, and on diplomacy to deal with the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Hizbollah pursued a militant strategy of armed resistance and conflict with Israel. These two strategies clashed repeatedly. Escalations of conflict between

Hizbollah and Israel shook investor confidence, drove away tourists, and drained precious public resources. Indeed this contradiction between the strategies was one of the main reasons that Hariri could not manage an economic takeoff in the 1990s. Hariri's efforts to achieve a diplomatic end to the Israeli occupation of the South through UN resolution 425 bore no fruit, and Hizbollah's strategy appeared vindicated in May 2000, when the Barak government withdrew unilaterally from Lebanon, under pressure from Hizbollah's fighters. The tensions between Hariri's and Hizbollah's strategies also reflected an underlying struggle for power among the Sunni and Shiite communities in Lebanon. Throughout most of the postwar period, however, Syria's President Hafez Al Assad had managed these tensions and contradictions by assigning different roles to the various players in the country.

The death of Hafez Al Assad in 2000, the events of September 11 and the changed U.S. role and presence in the region, UN Resolution 1559, followed by the assassination of Hariri and the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, along with the rise of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad in Iran and Hamas in Palestine changed much of this status quo. The March 14 coalition that arose in Lebanon after Hariri's assassination was closely allied with the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia and was generally supportive of the full implementation of UN Resolution 1559. Hizbollah and several other parties and groups in Lebanon fully opposed 1559 as well as any drift toward the United States and the West, and remained allied with Syria and Iran. Also, with the Syrian withdrawal, sectarian tensions rose in Lebanon regarding who would really govern post-Syrian Lebanon. The dramatic assassination of Hariri created an outpouring of support for the Hariri camp, and the March 14 anti-Syrian coalition won a controversial majority in Parliament in the 2005 elections and formed the current government. Hizbollah, and the Shiites in general, as well as some of the Christians, felt threatened by the rise of this strong Sunni power with international backing.

All of these tensions and contradictions have been carried into the current crisis. The state in Lebanon has been traditionally weak, particularly in security matters. During the 1975-90 civil war, the state lost all security control. In the postwar period the Syrians generally controlled security matters, leaving the Lebanese state to deal with social services and economic matters. Thus, when the Syrians withdrew, there was no effective Lebanese security establishment in place, neither in the army nor in the internal security and intelligence services. Moreover, the army and security services all reproduce the confessional mosaic that characterizes Lebanese society and hence are fragile organizations that are ineffective when confessional tensions are involved. The current government is particularly weak, because it is a Hariri government without Rafiq Hariri, is the result of a controversial election, and is trying to square the circle of contradictory strategies within the country.

The options before the Lebanese government are bleak. First, Hizbollah is unlikely to accept handing in its heavy weapons, foregoing its control of the southern suburbs and the South, or admitting defeat any time soon. Like Hamas, it sees itself pitted in an ongoing struggle against Israel for which it and its followers claim to be willing to accept great sacrifices. Therefore, the government—of which Hizbollah is a member—is going to be under constant pressure to maintain some level of defiance. If the government moves to implement Resolution 1559, the members of the government from both Shiite parties, Amal and Hizbollah, will resign, and the government will collapse. The country will then either have to face the crisis without a functioning government, or with an extremely colorless and weak one that is barely able to keep the ministries running.

Second, the army, which might be tasked with the implementation of Resolution 1559 or a move into the southern suburbs and/or the South, is about 35 percent Shiite. The army, therefore, is unlikely to stay united if it is asked to implement steps that are rejected by Hizbollah, the main political representative of the Shiites in Lebanon.

Third, Sunni-Shiite tensions have already risen considerably during this most recent crisis. Of course, these events come at a time of a simmering Shiite-Sunni civil war in Iraq, rising Iranian ambitions in the region, and fears of the ambitions of Sunni powers like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan. More directly, however, many of Hizbollah's followers speak openly of their suspicions that the Hariri camp, in its enthusiasm for Resolution 1559 and its close relations with the Bush administration, is not entirely unhappy that this war has been unleashed on Hizbollah. Tensions will be fanned as hundreds of thousands of Shiite refugees from the South are driven into Beirut and other parts of the country. There are extremely serious concerns in Lebanon today that a frustrated Hizbollah and Shiite community will accept neither defeat or weakness, nor a Sunni-implemented Resolution 1559, and that Shiite-Sunni tensions might get out of hand. Indeed, the current government's main concern has been to manage these tensions in order to avoid the worst case scenario of Sunni-Shiite strife.

Fourth, Lebanon already has more than \$35 billion in debt (approximately 180 percent of its GDP, the highest ratio in the world). The humanitarian and infrastructure disasters that have occurred in the past week alone, as well as business losses, are already in the billions of dollars. Even before this latest war, the Lebanese government was limping along trying to keep the Lebanese political patchwork together and coaxing the economy forward. Its challenges have become exponentially bigger.

In conclusion, the government of Lebanon will have its hands full responding to massive humanitarian and infrastructure needs, and avoiding political, security, or monetary collapse. It is not in a political or institutional position to provide a military backbone for moves into the southern suburbs of Beirut or the South. Although international troops could be effective in the South, the same cannot be applied to the southern suburbs. If Hizbollah and the Shiite community are unwilling to cooperate, the Lebanese government cannot impose itself by force.

The likely outcome of the current situation, then, will be a festering crisis in which much of the South is emptied of its inhabitants, hundreds of thousands of Shiite refugees are stranded in Beirut and other parts of the country, and the government remains paralyzed vis-à-vis Resolution 1559 and real security measures in southern Beirut or the South. This will be an unsustainable situation that might lead either to a collapse of the Siniora government or to civil strife within Lebanon, or both, with an accompanying expansion of power for Hizbollah, Syria, and Iran at the expense of the March 14 coalition and their western and Saudi backers. After all, Hizbollah is much better equipped for internal war than any other group in the country.

One of the few possible factors that might lead Hizbollah to accept a change of status and strategy in Lebanon is pressure from Iran, its main funder, backer, and guide. However, it is hard to imagine that, given the current international climate and the defiance of the Ahmedinejad government, striking a deal with Iran would lead to the reining in of Hizbollah and a change of its role and status in Lebanon. But in such difficult diplomacy

lies the only real hope of a semi-positive outcome to the current crisis; otherwise, Lebanon is set to enter into another long period of unrest.

## **REALITIES THE UNITED STATES CANNOT IGNORE**

### **Moving Beyond the Limitations of U.S. Policy**

Michele Dunne

Senior Associate, Middle East Program

The Bush administration policy of focusing on an overall transformation of the Middle East and avoiding direct diplomacy to address the Arab-Israeli conflict has run up against its limitations. The current conflagration shows that it is time for the United States to address the ongoing conflicts between Israel and its Arab neighbors. This does not mean that the administration's strategic goals in the Middle East—which include promoting democracy and eliminating regional troublemaking by Iran and Syria—should be abandoned. Rather, they should be complemented by direct efforts to address the ongoing conflicts.

The Bush administration came to office with a starkly different view of the Middle East than that of its predecessors. Ending conflicts between Israel and its Arab neighbors—the Palestinians, Lebanese, and Syrians—was no longer seen as a central U.S. policy goal, or at any rate was seen as not possible under the conditions prevailing in 2001. Rather, the Bush administration hoped to change the strategic equation in the region by eliminating or neutralizing regional troublemakers, identified as the leaderships of Iraq, Iran, Syria, and to a lesser extent Libya. In addition, after the September 2001 terrorist attacks the administration adopted the additional goal of promoting democracy in the Middle East, a visionary step that reversed decades of support for authoritarianism.

Surely the Middle East needs democracy and responsible behavior by states, but it is not reasonable to expect such developments alone—even should they be achieved—to settle conflicts between Israel and the Arab parties. Reducing the power of Hamas and Hizbollah and compelling them to act responsibly or be excluded from political participation will require far more than stopping assistance from Syria and Iran. The cutoff of assistance to Palestinian extremists from Saddam Hussein since 2003, for example, did nothing to reduce Palestinian resistance against Israel. The Lebanese state and Palestinian Authority can only be strengthened and become able to enforce limits on Hizbollah and Hamas within the context of negotiated solutions to the conflicts that justify the two groups' militancy.

It is time for the Bush administration to move beyond the policy it set in 2001. Realizing the president's vision of a stable and democratic Middle East will require active U.S. diplomacy on the core Arab-Israeli issues.

## **Hizbollah**

Julia Choucair

Associate, Middle East Program

The U.S. government's willingness to allow Israel to continue its military campaign in Lebanon is based on the rationale that Hizbollah will be severely weakened, allowing its disarmament and the deployment of the Lebanese army in southern Lebanon. The rationale that Hizbollah can be crippled by military force and that the Lebanese government can then fully disarm Hizbollah ignores certain realities.

First, while certainly Israel can inflict severe damage on Hizbollah's military capabilities in the short term, it cannot eliminate Hizbollah through military force or prevent it from rearming because Hizbollah is deeply rooted in the Lebanese political arena. Formed in 1982 as a response to Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, Hizbollah was initially an underground movement but has since transformed itself into a full-fledged political party that represents the majority of Lebanese Shiites. It has been actively engaged in Lebanese politics since 1992 and currently has 14 seats in Lebanon's 128-seat parliament, as well as two ministers. It is a major provider of social services, running schools, hospitals, and agricultural services for thousands of Shiites in Lebanon, and also receives financial support from thousands of Lebanese Shiites around the world. Previous military confrontations with Hizbollah have only added to the group's prestige. The death of Lebanese civilians feeds resentment that strengthens Hizbollah's domestic standing.

Second, the current attack on Lebanon will not put the Lebanese government in a position to disarm Hizbollah. Lebanon's fragile government is a delicate balance of the country's religious communities and is not united or coherent enough to enforce disarmament. The internal Lebanese debate on Hizbollah's arms, launched after UN Resolution 1559 and the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, was stalled not because of a lack of will but due to the inability of other Lebanese parties to disarm Hizbollah. Far from pressuring the Lebanese state to "get its act together," the military attacks on Lebanon's infrastructure will further weaken the government and may even lead to its collapse.

In addition, Washington's belief that military pressure on Damascus and Tehran would deal a decisive blow to Hizbollah misunderstands the relationship between Hizbollah and Iran and Syria. Hizbollah is allied with Iran and Syria against Israel, but this does not mean that Hizbollah is simply a puppet of both regimes. It is true that this alliance is strong, with Iran providing substantial financial assistance and weapons and Syria supplies, logistical help, as well as political backing. But in the past, Hizbollah has shown it makes its own strategic decisions. Most importantly, pressure on Iran and Syria does not eliminate the hostility to Israel among Hizbollah's supporters and the rationale for bearing arms.

Finding a near term solution to the current crisis cannot be accomplished without Hizbollah's participation. If Hizbollah does not agree to the Lebanese army deploying in the South, civil strife might break out and the army itself might split. For this reason, the means must be found to communicate with Hizbollah, through third parties or through a second-track diplomatic effort. The objection will be raised that this communication itself will be perceived as a victory for Hizbollah. The fact remains, however, that no ceasefire is possible otherwise.

Ultimately, a long-term solution to the challenge of Hizbollah will only come as part of a regional peace settlement that addresses the overall conflict between Israel and its neighbors (Lebanon and Syria) and finds a resolution to the Palestinian problem.

## **Hamas**

Nathan J. Brown  
Senior Associate, Middle East Program

U.S. attempts to help find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are inevitably hampered by two harsh realities that Washington recognizes but cannot change: even in the best of times (which have long since passed), the negotiating positions of the two parties were very far apart, and the recent Palestinian elections have brought to power Hamas, an organization that rejects the very concept of a negotiated solution and embraces attacks on civilian targets as a legitimate tool.

But there are other realities the United States has chosen to ignore that complicate still further attempts to find a solution to the conflict, turning a difficult task into an impossible one.

First, Hamas is not just a military organization that employs terrorism. It is also a broadly-based socio-political movement deeply rooted in Palestinian society. Israel's destruction of ministries, power plants, and charitable organizations' offices will not undermine popular support for Hamas or even significantly degrade its military capacity.

Second, attempts to isolate Hamas diplomatically and financially will not lead to immediate changes. The United States can starve the movement of resources, creating divisions within the leadership on how to react, but there will be no immediate impact on the movement's policies and strategic vision. In the long run, moderate but firm and sustained pressure could lead Hamas to evolve into an organization willing to negotiate with Israel, but the transformation is not inevitable and, in any case, will take time.

Third, pursuing harsh diplomatic and military tactics against Hamas may drive Hamas from power, but there will be much damage to civilian lives and political institutions in the process. It is difficult to envision that the already weak Palestinian Authority can emerge as a viable political and administrative entity from the present onslaught. The infrastructure for vital social services—including health and education—are likely to suffer grievous harm. In addition to creating a long-term humanitarian crisis, the collapse of the Palestinian Authority will leave Israel and the United States without a partner for negotiations—or even daily business.

Fourth, if Hamas is driven from power, at an enormous cost to the Palestinian population, Hamas will not be destroyed but will revert to what it terms “resistance,” which will involve violence. And it will hardly be discredited in the eyes of most Palestinians, who are inclined to see the movement as the victim rather than the perpetrator of the current crisis.

A policy based on recognition of the full set of regional realities must give up on the idea of a quick fix to the challenge posed by Hamas. An effective approach must be based on the lesson the United States has learned so painfully in Iraq: insurgencies cannot be defeated exclusively by military means. It is imperative to combat terrorism and extremism coming from Hamas. But a policy that goes no further—and aims solely to destroy Hamas and anything associated with it—will only bequeath the all too familiar problems to future leaders in more virulent form.

## Syria

Marina Ottaway

Director, Middle East Program

The Syrian government supports Hizbollah and Hamas. It took advantage of its dominant position in Lebanon from the end of the civil war to 2005 to help Hizbollah assemble the arsenal of missiles that allows it to strike deeper into Israeli territory than ever before. It continues to meddle in Lebanese politics and has not been cooperating with the United States on Iraq. While the Syrian presence helped stabilize Lebanon in the aftermath of the civil war and was thus welcomed initially by the United States and Israel, it has become detrimental, helping to keep the Lebanese government weak and the country divided.

Political or even military intervention against Syria at this time would nevertheless do little to bring Hizbollah and Hamas under control and could easily open a new crisis point in a region that already has too many.

Hizbollah and Hamas are not simply puppets of Syria. They exist independently of Syria and have independent leaderships. Syria cannot simply order them to desist from attacking Israel. If Syrian support ceased, Hizbollah's arsenal would quickly become less sophisticated. However, the two *intifadas* in Palestine and present actions by Hamas have shown that movements with fairly rudimentary weapons can keep Israel in a permanent state of insecurity.

Syria potentially could create more problems for Israel that it does now. Former president Hafez Al Assad established a de facto truce with Israel and his son Bashar has continued to observe it. The boundary between Syria and Israel has remained quiet for years: while Syria does not accept the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, it has not actively tried to re-establish control. This de facto truce means that Israel is now fighting on two fronts rather than three.

Furthermore, the likely alternatives to the present Syrian regime are not better than the status quo. The secular opposition, composed of individuals rather than organizations, is disorganized, fragmented, and extremely weak. The strongest opposition force in the country is the Muslim Brotherhood. Its real strength is difficult to gauge because repression by the regime has forced the organization underground and its top leaders into exile, but it is certain to play a central role if the present government loses its grip. There is no democratic happy ending to regime change in Syria.

Regime change in Syria would also contribute to the spread of sectarian strife in the region. Syria has its Sunnis and Shiites (the Alawites, a minority that has controlled power for decades), its Kurds, and other religious minorities. Like Iraq and unlike Lebanon, Syria has no mechanisms in place for even beginning to handle sectarian strife.

Through its support for Hamas and particularly for Hizbollah, Syria has undoubtedly contributed to the present crisis. The solution to the crisis does not pass through Syria, however. Hizbollah and Hamas, as the other commentaries here show, are organizations deeply rooted in their respective societies. The loss of Syrian support would weaken them militarily but not politically, and they would remain in any case a threat to Israeli security.

The United States needs to continue putting pressure on Syria to stop arming Hamas and Hizbollah. Pressure will not help if the United States does not also improve its intelligence and monitor Syria's actions. Pursuing a policy of regime change, however, would create more serious problems than it would solve.

## **Iran**

George Perkovich

Vice-President for Studies—Global Security and Economic Development

The Iranian support of Hizbollah and Hamas must be understood in the context of the country's broad strategic objective to be recognized as the dominant indigenous power in the Middle East. Backing Hizbollah in the present conflict in Lebanon is a risky strategy that could have significant negative repercussions for Iran. Iranian leaders, however, are gambling that when the dust settles in Lebanon, the international community will be forced to recognize Iran's dominant position in the Middle East and will be no less willing than it is today to accommodate Iran's production of material that could be used in nuclear weapons.

When Iran's undeclared nuclear activities were exposed to the world in the summer of 2002, Iranian officials retreated to buy time and devise a strategy. They stayed on the defensive in 2003 while the U.S. prepared and then initiated the invasion of Iraq. As U.S. forces vanquished the Iraqi Army on the battlefield, Iranian diplomats emitted conciliatory signals and even secretly sought direct negotiations with the United States. Washington rejected that offer. Then the momentum in Iraq reversed, and the United States went from strong to weak. Iran felt stronger with each day.

Since spring 2005, Iran has been on a robust counter-attack with only a few pauses. These pauses occur when international resistance appears that might lead to Iran's embarrassment or sanction in the UN Security Council. Iran then tests the strength of that resistance, concludes it is neither firm nor decisive, and remounts the offensive. A typical example occurred when Iran's Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani arrived for talks earlier this year with EU Foreign Minister Javier Solana and pre-empted the European's expected call for Iran to suspend uranium enrichment by declaring that Iran was immediately opening two new centrifuge cascades.

Iran's nuclear program is the immediate focus of conflict, the trip-wire that could put Iran under meaningful international sanctions or even military attack. But Iran's broader strategic objective is to be recognized as the dominant indigenous power in the Middle East.

These narrow and wider objectives have converged in Lebanon. Iran's blustery refusal to respond this month to the incentive package offered by the EU-3, the United States, Russia, and China to resolve the nuclear crisis left the international powers no choice but to increase pressure on Iran via the UN Security Council. The Hizbollah incursion into Israel, breaking a six-year pattern of restraint, signaled that Iran and its allies can at any time shake the foundations of Middle Eastern states, including Israel, and spike oil prices and global worry. Attention and energy are diverted from the UN effort to isolate Iran, and the idea of accommodating Iran rather than confronting it starts to seem the least bad among no good policy options.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan fear the momentum behind Iran's regional ambitions, which largely explains their surprisingly public criticism of Hizbollah, and by implication Iran. The anti-Israel declamations of Iranian President Ahmedinejad and Iran's continued support of actors that refuse to recognize Israel's existence has paradoxically elevated Iran's standing in the Arab street and alarmed Sunni Arab rulers who have either recognized Israel or moved toward it.

Iranian leaders risk over-reaching. If Hizbollah is perceived to lose badly (a big if), and Iran cannot come to its rescue, then Iran's power would be diminished and the wisdom of confronting it, including on the nuclear issue, would be more apparent. And if Sunnis broadly conclude that Hizbollah and its Shiite Iranian patrons, despite the excitement generated by their anti-Israel words and deeds, actually harm Sunni interests, then resistance to Iran's regional ambitions may become mobilized.

### **Understanding Regional Reactions: Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan**

Amr Hamzawy

Senior Associate, Middle East Program

In a surprising move, the governments of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan have accused Hizbollah, and implicitly Syria, of recklessness and adventurism contrary to Arab interests for its role in provoking the latest conflict with Israel. This is a significant departure in Arab politics.

This stand against Hizbollah reveals a break between the Syrian regime and its traditional allies in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Both countries tried to help Syria avoid international sanctions in the aftermath of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination, mediating between Damascus and western capitals. While pressing the Syrian regime to stop interfering in Lebanese domestic politics, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have consistently supported it. However, the Baath regime has been less responsive to Saudi and Egyptian demands over the last months, leading to tensions that have increased dramatically as a result of the current confrontation between Hizbollah and Israel. The Saudi and Egyptian governments apparently believe that Hizbollah acted upon Syrian request, disregarding Lebanese national interests.

The anti-Hizbollah position taken by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan also reflects the real fears among some Arab governments of the growing Iranian influence in the region. The rise to power of pro-Iranian Shiite groups in Iraq has led King Abdullah of Jordan to denounce the emergence of a "Shiite Crescent" in the Middle East. The Saudi foreign minister, Saud Al-Faisal has criticized the Bush administration for destroying Iraq and allowing Iran to dominate its political scene. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak accused Shiite communities in the Arab world of prioritizing their religious allegiance to Iran over the bond of nationalism in their countries. Iranian nuclear ambitions have added to Arab fears, especially in the Gulf. The Saudi, Egyptian, and Jordanian governments believe that Hizbollah serves not only Syrian ambitions, but also Iran's agenda of destabilizing the Middle East and should therefore be contained. Significantly, during an Arab League meeting on July 15, Saudi Arabia and Egypt endorsed for the first time UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the disarming of Hizbollah.

Egypt and Jordan in particular also have domestic reasons for accusing Hizbollah of irresponsible political adventurism. In addition to being a Shiite group active in Lebanese sectarian politics, Hizbollah is also an Islamist movement with ties to similar organizations in other Arab countries. Both the Egyptian and Jordanian governments have grown fearful of the rise of Islamist movements after the Muslim Brotherhood's electoral gains in Egypt and Hamas' election victory in Palestine. Their strategic interest in containing Hizbollah, and for that matter Hamas, feeds on the ongoing domestic conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Action Front, respectively.