



A dubious distraction

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'WHEN nothing else works, there is always Israel': So the late Egyptian journalist Lutfi al-Khuli liked to describe the motto of Arab radicalism decades ago.

The analysis was apt, because Arab obsession with Israel did work on countless occasions. Despots used Israel as an excuse for their brutal rule. Corrupt leaders adopted anti-Israeli rhetoric as a diversion from their misdeeds. Confused intellectuals used Israel as an object of hate to hide their ineptitude.

Nor was it only Arab radicals. The late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the father of the Islamic Republic in Iran, also used anti-Israel rhetoric whenever he found himself in a tight corner.

More recently, three men have tried to play the Israel card as a means of getting out of their respective tight

corners: President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of the Islamic Republic, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria and Hassan Nasrallah, leader of the Lebanese branch of the Hezbollah. All are under increasing pressure both from their domestic constituencies and international opinion.

Ahmadinejad is under pressure to respond to a carrots-and-stick offer by the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany. He knows that a positive response to the offer could mark the end for his strategy of extending the Islamic Republic's influence throughout the Middle East - yet a rejection of the package could isolate his regime, bring about international sanctions and weaken his already shaky regime inside Iran.

To avoid having to make that choice, Ahmadinejad decided to play the Israel card. This meant moving the

Hezbollah pawn that the Islamic Republic created in Lebanon in 1982 and has financed, trained and armed for the past quarter of a century.

It is no accident that, during the last 10 weeks, arms supplies to Hezbollah have increased dramatically. In the same period, Iran's defense minister met with Hezbollah leaders and commanders at least twice. Iranian media say the Islamic Republic also increased the size of its military advisory delegation to Hezbollah as "precaution against Israeli aggression."

Syria's Assad also found himself in need of an "Israel diversion." He and members of his family and administration risk indictment for alleged involvement in the murder of the late Lebanese Premier Rafik Hariri. Worse still, his regime's opponents have just created a united front in which senior former Baathists sit alongside leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and prominent liberal and social-democratic figures. Assad has tried to survive by becoming a liegeman of Tehran; but he knows that his Iranian masters might abandon him at any time.

Provoking a new conflict with Israel over Lebanon could give Assad a chance to cast himself in the role of the peacemaker. Buthaina Shaaban, one of Assad's aides, has hinted that, if allowed to return to Lebanon, the Syrians are prepared to disarm the Hezbollah and make sure that the Lebanese border with Israel is as calm as the ceasefire line between Israel and Syria has been for

decades. Assad may also be prepared to drop Hamas, just as Syria dropped the Kurdish terrorist group PKK as part of a deal with Turkey a decade ago.

Hezbollah also needs a diversion. With the departure of the Syrians and the beginnings of democratization in Lebanon, the group has found itself increasingly isolated. Its performance in Lebanon's first democratic general election was disappointing - and its failure in the streets even more so. Each time Hezbollah organized a demonstration against democratic forces, the latter responded with even bigger crowds.

It is clear that the overwhelming majority of Lebanese want to see Hezbollah disarmed so that the country can have a single army under government control. So, what better tactic for Hezbollah than inventing a new war with Israel to remind the Lebanese that they still need the militia as their "national resistance"?

The trouble for Ahmadinejad, Assad and Hezbollah is that the Israel diversion may not work this time as it has done in the past.

The current conflict may have diverted some of the G-8 attention from the Iranian nuclear dossier. But the issue is unlikely to fade away.

Ahmadinejad knows that there is no substantial anti-Israel constituency inside Iran. His hope, therefore, is to win the support of the Arab regimes and masses for his ultra-radical

stance against Israel. But that has not happened. With the exception of Syria, no Arab regime has rallied behind the Islamic Republic over the nuclear issue. As for the mythical "Arab Street," there is no evidence that it is about to "explode" in support of Ahmadinejad.

As for Syria, it is unlikely that the conflict in Lebanon will divert international attention from the Assad regime's involvement in the Hariri murder. Nor is there any evidence that Washington is prepared to make a deal with Damascus to insure the Assad regime in exchange for its cooperation on other issues, including disarming of the Hezbollah.

The biggest loser may well be the Hezbollah. Neither Iran nor Syria is prepared to risk a bigger war in order to save it from destruction. This was made clear Friday, when Ahmadinejad, speaking in a provincial tour, called on the "international community" to end the conflict by "restraining Israel." This was strange coming from a man who, before the current fighting, had vowed to *destroy* Israel on more than a dozen occasions.

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Inside Lebanon, Hezbollah has failed to enlist the support even of its formal allies, including Nabih Berri, leader of the more moderate Shi'ite Amal Movement, and Gen. Michel Aoun, the Maronite politician who had signed an alliance with Nasrallah.

Ahmadinejad, Assad and Hezbollah may well have planned for a limited conflict with Israel, one in which the Jewish state would back down, handing them a moral victory. Their plan may have been based on the assumption that Israel would not dare widen the scope of the war triggered by Hamas and Hezbollah.

Today, the trio find themselves alone. Most Arabs refuse to be dragged into a bigger war in the shaping of which they had no say. Moreover, most Lebanese do not see why they should risk the destruction of their country solely to allow the Hezbollah to remain a state within the state.

The "Israel diversion" tactic may have passed its sell-by date.