



Lebanon: The Only Exit Strategy

[Charles Krauthammer](#)

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There is crisis and there is opportunity. Amid the general wringing of hands over the seemingly endless and escalating Israel-Hezbollah fighting, everyone asks: Where will it end?

The answer, blindingly clear, begins with understanding that this crisis represents a rare, perhaps irreproducible, opportunity.

Every important party in the region and in the world, except the radical Islamists in Tehran and their clients in Damascus, wants Hezbollah disarmed and removed from south Lebanon so that it is no longer able to destabilize the peace of both Lebanon and the broader Middle East.

Which parties? Start with the great powers. In September 2004 they passed U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559, demanding that Hezbollah disarm and allow the Lebanese army to take back control of south Lebanon.

The resolution enjoyed the sponsorship of the United States and, yes, France. As the former mandatory power in Lebanon, France was important in helping the Lebanese expel Syria during last year's Cedar Revolution, but it understands that Lebanon's independence and security are forfeit so long as Hezbollah -- a lawless, terrorist, private militia answering to Syria and Iran -- occupies south Lebanon as a rogue mini-state.

Then there are the Arabs, beginning with the Lebanese who want Hezbollah out. The majority of Lebanese -- Christian, Druze, Sunni Muslim and secular -- bitterly resent their country's being hijacked by Hezbollah and turned into a war zone. And in the name of what Lebanese interest? Israel evacuated every square inch of Lebanon six years ago.

The other Arabs have spoken, too. In a stunning development, the 22-member Arab League criticized

Hezbollah for provoking the current crisis. It is unprecedented for the Arab League to criticize any Arab party while it is actively engaged in hostilities with Israel. But the Arab states know that Hezbollah, a Shiite militia in the service of Persian Iran, is a threat not just to Lebanon but to them as well. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan have openly criticized Hezbollah for starting a war on what is essentially Iran's timetable (to distract attention from Iran's pending referral to the Security Council for sanctions over its nuclear program). They are far more worried about Iran and its proxies than about Israel. They are therefore eager to see Hezbollah disarmed and defanged.

Fine. Everyone agrees it must be done. But who to do it? No one. The Lebanese are too weak. The Europeans don't invade anyone. After its bitter experience of 20 years ago, the United States has a Lebanon allergy. And Israel could not act out of the blue because it would immediately have been branded the aggressor and forced to retreat.

Hence the golden, unprecedented opportunity. Hezbollah makes a fatal mistake. It crosses the U.N.-delineated international frontier to attack Israel, kill soldiers and take hostages. This aggression is so naked that even Russia joins in the Group of Eight summit communique blaming Hezbollah for the violence and calling for the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty in the south.

But only one country has the capac-

ity to do the job. That is Israel, now recognized by the world as forced into this fight by Hezbollah's aggression.

The road to a solution is therefore clear: Israel liberates south Lebanon and gives it back to the Lebanese.

It starts by preparing the ground with air power, just as the Persian Gulf War began with a 40-day air campaign. But if all that happens is the air campaign, the result will be failure. Hezbollah will remain in place, Israel will remain under the gun, Lebanon will remain divided and unfree. And this war will start again at a time of Hezbollah and Iran's choosing.

Just as in Kuwait in 1991, what must follow the air campaign is a land invasion to clear the ground and expel the occupier. Israel must retake south Lebanon and expel Hezbollah. It would then declare the obvious: that it has no claim to Lebanese territory and is prepared to withdraw and hand south Lebanon over to the Lebanese army (augmented perhaps by an international force), thus finally bringing about what the world has demanded -- implementation of Resolution 1559 and restoration of south Lebanon to Lebanese sovereignty.

Only two questions remain: Israel's will and America's wisdom. Does Prime Minister Ehud Olmert have the courage to do what is so obviously necessary? And will Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's upcoming peace trip to the Middle East force a premature cease-fire that

sparing her the humiliation of coming home empty-handed but preventing precisely the kind of decisive military outcome that would secure

the interests of Israel, Lebanon, the moderate Arabs and the West?