



Up to No Good. Iran and Syria's sinister Mideast offensive strikes Gaza and Lebanon

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As violence persists in Lebanon and escalates to civil war in Gaza, it would be foolish to minimize the turmoil as merely more of the same. The events in Lebanon and Gaza, though separated by a few hundred miles, are closely related. They were ignited from the same source--Syria, and by extension Iran--and they are all part of a renewed regional offensive against the United States and Israel, a strategic campaign whose coherence has gone unnoticed, and therefore unanswered, for over two years.

The latest fighting in Lebanon began on May 20, when investigations of a bank robbery ended in a standoff between the Lebanese Armed Forces and the al Qaeda affiliate Fatah al Islam, holed up in a Palestinian

refugee camp near Tripoli. To this day, the standoff continues. A series of bombings, meanwhile--most recently one on the Beirut waterfront on June 13 that killed an anti-Syrian Sunni member of parliament, his son, and 8 others--have heightened fears of a renewal of the Lebanese civil war (1975-90), which also began when Palestinian militias challenged the government's authority.

Fatah al Islam is a pro-Syrian Palestinian Islamist group that, according to Lebanese and Israeli officials, is supported and directed by Syria and Iran. It timed its attack to coincide with the Lebanese government's petition to the U.N. Security Council to establish an international tribunal to prosecute the suspected killers of former prime minister Rafik Hariri,

assassinated on February 14, 2005. (Hariri had been a strong spokesman for a free Lebanon, and his killing is widely believed to have been Syrian work. It backfired, triggering the Cedar Revolution, a series of peaceful mass demonstrations that culminated in the expulsion of some 14,000 Syrian troops and intelligence agents from Lebanon in April 2005 and the holding of new democratic elections.) But the Fatah al Islam attack failed to intimidate the government of Lebanon into withdrawing its request and letting Syria off the hook. Despite the bloodshed, the Security Council voted on May 30 to establish a tribunal.

Syria is bent on reestablishing its hegemony in Lebanon, but it cannot attack directly. The government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, which came to power after Hariri's assassination, enjoys not only wide international support, but also domestic support from many of Lebanon's Christians, Sunnis, and others. Instead, to challenge Lebanon's government, Syria must delegitimize it domestically and isolate it within the Arab world and Sunni politics. The easiest way to do that is to portray the Lebanese government as an agent of the United States and Israel, and then orchestrate events to bear this out.

Syria's surrogates in Lebanon

It is a fair inference from the actions and statements of Syria's clients that Damascus has been dabbling in Sunni jihadist politics in order to implement this plan. Specifically, it has striven to ensure that the clash

between Fatah al Islam and the Lebanese army was not narrowly defined as a Lebanese government-al Qaeda struggle, but rather was cast as a Lebanese-Palestinian clash. When the army attacked the Islamists' base of operations inside the camp, it could be portrayed as assaulting Palestinian refugees, whose cause is the emblematic grievance of Arab nationalism. In the process, Lebanon's government would lose standing both at home and in the Arab world.

Another Syrian/Iranian client, the militant Lebanese party Hezbollah, has also behaved in a manner consistent with the strategy outlined here. Several days after the outbreak of violence, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, warned that the Lebanese military, by attacking the Islamists inside the camp, had flouted the longstanding ban on entering the camps and thus had crossed a red line. On Lebanese TV Nasrallah said, "We will not agree to be partners to the military entering the camps. . . . We mustn't turn Lebanon into a battlefield in which we fight al Qaeda for the Americans."

This should raise eyebrows. To protect Sunni extremists like Fatah al Islam is uncharacteristic of the Shiite Hezbollah; indeed, Hezbollah and al Qaeda have been open enemies, and in the past Fatah al Islam has threatened to assassinate Hezbollah leaders. Even the pro-Palestinian, old style pan-Arab nationalist tone of his speech is atypical for Nasrallah. As the scholar Fouad Ajami has shown, since the 1970s Lebanese

Shiite politics has been defined in opposition to pan-Arab nationalism, particularly that represented by armed Sunni Palestinians. Hezbollah seems not to be guided strictly by its local interests.

Still another pro-Syrian group has also cast the Lebanese government as the enemy of the Arab nation via the Palestinian cause. In a speech the day the fighting broke out, the spokesman for the Marxist Palestinian group the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) accused the Lebanese government of using Fatah al Islam as an excuse to massacre Palestinians. He said: "A third party interfered. . . . There are snipers, and there are people carrying . . . rockets who are affiliated with the [Hariri] Movement. I call on Saad Hariri [and] . . . Prime Minister Fouad Siniora: 'Do you want to be viewed by history as the one who made the political decision to commit a massacre against the Palestinian civilians?'" Like Hezbollah, the PFLP-GC is chastising the Lebanese government on behalf of an al Qaeda-linked organization that stands for everything inimical to its secular, Marxist agenda. Again, the group's statements are incongruous in a strictly local context. Like Hezbollah, the PFLP-GC appears to be operating in step with a broader strategic vision, one that comes from Syria and Iran.

Lebanese leaders understand the conflict in these broad terms, and they are seeking help from the West. Lebanese Druze leader and anti-Syrian politician Walid Jumblatt

placed responsibility for the violence squarely on Damascus, declaring: "Syrian president Basher Assad said in the summer that Lebanon would become the center of al Qaeda and Iraq Number Two. Now he is fulfilling this vision." For Jumblatt, it is clear that Syrian and Iranian involvement with Fatah al Islam serves the purpose of drawing the Lebanese government into inadvertently killing Palestinians and thus casting pro-democratic, multi-ethnic Lebanon as an enemy of the Arab people.

The Syrian/Iranian strategy in Lebanon is a product of the changed climate in the Middle East following September 11, 2001. As a result of the attacks, U.S. strategy shifted from containment and deterrence to preemption and the championing of freedom. This shift brought down the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and removed Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, shifting the political balance in the region. The presence of U.S. troops and U.S.-installed or U.S.-supported democracies on the borders of Iran and Syria challenges both regimes. The idea of freedom is manifest in Afghanistan, next door to Iran; in Iraq, neighbor of both Syria and Iran; and in Lebanon, next to Syria. America's freedom policy challenges all the regimes in the neighborhood equally because it does not discriminate against any local sect: Afghanistan is Sunni; Iraq is predominantly Shiite; and Lebanon is Christian, Shiite, Sunni, and Druze. America cannot be accused of playing favorites.

Iran and Syria share an interest in confronting the U.S. presence in the region before Washington's freedom policy gives their populations potentially regime-threatening ideas. In addition to their mutual animosity toward the United States, they are allies in the Sunni-Shia cold war dividing the region. As two non-Sunni regimes (Syria is ruled by an Alawite elite, Iran by Shiite clerics), they seek to minimize the regional role of Sunni powers like Saudi Arabia and to assert their own dominance. For Syria and Iran, this is do or die.

The Palestinians

The Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, commanded and controlled from Damascus and financed by Tehran, is an important player in the Syrian/Iranian regional strategy. Hamas rose to power in the January 2006 elections in the Palestinian Authority. This capped a revolutionary change that has established the Levant as the new battleground on which Syrian/Iranian ambitions are being played out. In Washington before the Palestinian election, few observers had expected Hamas to beat the PLO's leading faction, Fatah, at the polls, much less to win a majority in the legislature (74 out of 132 seats). The prevailing wisdom had held that Hamas did not want to win; that it garnered its greatest support as an opposition group. When Hamas won, many explained the victory as a protest vote against corruption in the Palestinian Authority. What observers missed was that Hamas was acting to advance a regional strategy.

Hamas's electoral victory signaled Iran's renewal of an old project, a regional offensive derailed long ago in the killing fields of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Hamas's success in January 2006 showed that the Palestinians--the very embodiment of the Arab cause--had been seduced by Iranian radicalism as personified by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, elected president just months before. Iran became the strong horse. Unlike the Arab regimes, which were paralyzed by the American presence in the region after the invasion of Iraq, the mullahs in Tehran stood in continued defiance of American dominance. In an ironic twist, it was Persian Iran, and not an Arab country, that held out a new dream tying together the old Arab national causes with religious radicalism. Thus, Hamas's electoral victory had a significance transcending Palestinian politics and dovetailing with Iran's ambitions. Hamas now operates as an Iranian proxy, giving Tehran a say over issues at the heart of Arab politics.

In late April in the Gaza Strip, Hamas and other Palestinian factions declared an end to their cease-fire with Israel and initiated rocket attacks against Israeli cities. Now Hamas is threatening to escalate hostilities by attacking Israel's main electric grid in Ashkelon. The significance of this--as well as of the Palestinian civil war and Hamas's capture of Gaza--is that Hamas, and by extension Iran, has launched a real push to take over the Palestinian areas, just as the violence in Lebanon represents Syria's attempt to retake that country.

The war last summer

To further illuminate the regional context, it is necessary to revisit last summer's war between Israel and Hezbollah. This was widely viewed as an isolated campaign driven by Hezbollah's local interests: That is, Hezbollah instigated a war against Israel to rally Lebanese support for itself and so to repel international and local initiatives to disarm it.

But last summer's war did not begin in Lebanon. It began in Gaza, when Hamas kidnapped an Israeli soldier there. One month later, Hezbollah joined the fight. It fired rockets at Israeli border villages to divert attention while another Hezbollah unit crossed the border and kidnapped two additional soldiers, killing three others in the process.

By most Israeli accounts, Israel lost the "second Lebanon war," as some are calling it. Israel failed to stop Hezbollah's attacks, destroy the organization and its leaders, and create an effective security zone along its northern border. Israel lost because it had no strategic vision: It did not grasp the war's regional context. Hezbollah suffered heavy losses, but declared victory because it had succeeded in terrorizing Israel for weeks and had survived. Nasrallah was able to confront Israel, expose its strategic weakness--and live to tell the tale.

Iran and Syria were watching. The ineffectiveness and weakness of Israel's government offered a strategic opportunity: via the Palestinian areas, to confront an Israel unable to

answer the challenge. The current effort to turn Gaza into Hamastan is the shape this effort currently takes.

The coming war

Having won last summer's war by proxy, Syria and Iran now seek to further derail Western ambitions. They are escalating their offensive. They are fomenting discord in the region by directly challenging every key U.S. victory in the war on terror. They are working to further destabilize Iraq, Afghanistan (where Iranian explosives were recently discovered in the hands of our enemies), and now Lebanon.

Since Syria and Iran were able to accomplish so much in a mere four weeks last summer, their next logical strategic move would be to initiate another conflict with Israel. The Syrian regime is open about its intentions. Only last month, President Assad bluntly warned Israel that if it did not immediately enter talks about evacuating the Golan Heights, he would take the Golan back by force.

Syria and Iran see an opportunity they cannot pass up: The United States has no answer to the worsening situations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon. Evincing perplexity and weakness, not consistently willing to confront its enemies, the United States entered direct negotiations with Iran and Syria, naively hoping that the purveyors of violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon would willingly help resolve those problems.

Israel is likewise weakened, even paralyzed. Plagued by corruption scandals in addition to last summer's failure, its government is politically dysfunctional and militarily confused. The Winograd Commission investigating the war sharply criticized Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert's decision to launch hostilities. Any future Israeli government will find it difficult to initiate large military operations, even in the face of provocation. To Syria and Iran, Israel now seems a vulnerable, tempting target. Moreover, Syria and Iran hope another Israeli defeat will further damage U.S. interests and deepen America's image as a country in retreat.

Another Israeli loss could also undermine the government of Lebanon, as well as create momentum to weaken the United States in Iraq and elsewhere. As the mood in the region shifts, expect to see the elected governments under pressure and the tide of radicalism rising.

As Israel's war in Lebanon demonstrated, military toughness alone does not meet the growing Syrian/Iranian challenge. Instead of seeing all the problems in the Middle East solely as localized conflicts, we must understand their regional context. Only then can we devise a broad strategic vision to confront these threats. Toughness is necessary, but it will remain ineffective without a purpose and a plan.

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