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Middle East Brief

The United States and the Israel-Hezbollah War

Prof. Jeremy Pressman

Although American soldiers were not involved in the fighting in Lebanon and Israel this past summer, the United States was nonetheless a central player in the war. U.S. policy was defined by staunch American support for Israel and repeated calls by U.S. officials to use the crisis as a means to get at the root causes of violence in the region. What were the American objectives in this war? Does a preliminary assessment suggest that Washington took steps toward achieving them? How does U.S. policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict look moving forward?

American Objectives in the Israel-Hezbollah War

Two global foreign policy commitments informed the United States view of the Israel-Hezbollah confrontation this past summer; the war on terror and the democratization of the Middle East. Since September 11, 2001, the American war on terror has been defined to include several different international actors. In his speech of September 20, 2001, President George W. Bush stated that the war would “not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated,” and that “any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.” In addition, he warned, terrorists could not be accommodated but instead must be met by force. This approach has most directly been applied to al-Qaeda and its satellites, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Saddam Hussein’s regime. But it has also generated a general lack of U.S. sympathy for any terrorist groups that target American allies, even if the organization’s goals are more national than global in nature.¹

At the same time, the Bush administration has laid out a broad vision for the democratization of the Middle East as a way to undermine support for terrorism. The implicit assumption has been that such radical change may lead to short-term upheaval; the United States is changing the rules and recognizes that dictators and terrorists will not go gently into the night. But whatever instability may result, the U.S. believes, is necessary to reform the region and will, ultimately, be a small price to pay for a democratic Middle East.

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The United States and Hezbollah also have their own history, which established the backdrop for U.S. policy in the recent war. The United States lists Hezbollah as a foreign terrorist organization, and various sanctions apply.² The U.S. State Department's annual terrorism report takes note of Hezbollah's involvement in attacks on the U.S. Embassy and a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 and on the U.S. Embassy annex in Beirut in 1984. Hundreds of American personnel were killed in those attacks. The report also mentions the hijacking of TWA flight 847 in 1985, various kidnappings in Lebanon throughout the 1980s, and the attacks on the Israeli embassy (1992) and a Jewish cultural center in Argentina (1994). A member of Hezbollah was also indicted for his role in the bombing of the Khobar towers, a U.S. military housing complex in Saudi Arabia, in 1996.³

Taken together, both the historical context and these two broader ideas—the scope of the war on terror and the goal of a democratic Middle East—shaped United States policy in July 2006. Israel, a close American ally, was confronted by a terrorist group, Hezbollah. In keeping with its global stance, the United States was unsympathetic to calls to stop the fighting, because such a move, in effect, would protect Hezbollah. Instead, by letting Israel fight for weeks, the United States saw itself as weakening Hezbollah: Israel would weaken Hezbollah militarily, while the Israeli attack would force the Lebanese government to finally take control of southern Lebanon and thereby constrain Hezbollah politically.

Simultaneously, it was thought, giving Israel time to defeat Hezbollah would help the spread of democratization. After Lebanon's independence intifada (the Cedar Revolution) in 2005, the United States had pledged strong support for the fledgling democratic regime. But it was clear to Bush officials that Hezbollah, with its illiberal nature and pro-Syrian politics, was the major obstacle to a truly liberal and democratic Lebanon. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice remarked that she was "very concerned ... about Lebanon's freedom and democracy." She elaborated a few days later that "[t]he Government of [Prime Minister Fouad] Siniora is a good and young democratic government, but the extremists of Hezbollah have put that government at risk and have brought misery to the region. Any ceasefire cannot allow that condition to remain ..."⁴ By mid-2006, Hezbollah was no weaker in Lebanese politics, and it had not disarmed, as had been stipulated in UN Security Council Resolution 1559 of September 2, 2004. There was no move by the Lebanese government, of which Hezbollah was a part, to disarm Hezbollah or to deploy the Lebanese Army to southern Lebanon, Hezbollah's stronghold.

In essence, then, Israel would be doing Lebanese democrats a favor, it was believed, by defeating Hezbollah. Lebanon's reformist forces lacked the strength to marginalize Hezbollah, but Israeli military might could reshape the internal Lebanese balance of military and political power in a way that would benefit the U.S. push for democracy. Lebanese democracy would be able to flourish, it was thought, if Washington allowed Israel to defeat Hezbollah.⁵

The general message sent by the war was expected to accord with Bush administration rhetoric—and the neoconservative conviction—that America needed a muscular foreign policy after what was considered a decade of appeasement in the 1990s. We crush terrorists was to be the message—or, at least, we hit them very hard and degrade their capabilities. We stand up to terrorists. We fight back. We are not weak-kneed appeasers.

Such an approach, however, created a major risk with respect to Lebanon's future: namely, that by giving Israel the time to destroy Hezbollah, Lebanon as a unified country and growing economic entity might be destroyed. And, in fact, Israeli aerial bombing and collective punishment negatively affected huge swaths of the Lebanese population. On the economic front, if the result of the American policy of giving Israel a free hand was to scare away both investors and Lebanese expatriates for an indefinite period and ruin much of Lebanon's infrastructure, Lebanon's future as a democracy would be jeopardized. The Israeli military response, it was feared, would only compound the concerns of investors who had been frightened by Hezbollah's willingness to cross into Israel to attack, disregarding the "rules of the game" and creating uncertainty. The impact on Lebanon's intercommunal relations of Hezbollah's inviting a military response and Israel's delivering it could assume three

possible directions, two of which would likely undermine democratization. The result thus far, however, is not clear. One possibility is that as Lebanon settles back to normal, the pre-war stability could return. Alternatively, the war might reinforce fragmentation, heighten intercommunal tensions, and undermine national unity. Or the war might cause the Lebanese people to rally around Hezbollah. Ultimately, all Lebanese are faced with the question of who is to blame for the war's devastation, and how they answer that question will affect the relative unity or fragmentation of the country.

In short, then, defeating terrorism could come at the cost of undermining democratization. The two United States goals in the region could come into conflict.

The war was also a proxy war fought by Hezbollah and Israel with the support of Iran and the United States, respectively. Many in Washington see Hezbollah as the long arm of Iran. A defeat of Hezbollah would send a strong message to Tehran, the center of anti-Americanism and a force for regional terrorism and antidemocratic policies. At a time when Washington and Tehran differ on so many key issues—especially nuclear proliferation, relations with Israel, and the situation in Iraq—the Israel-Hezbollah war was an opportunity for both the American and Iranian sides to score points.

Although Iran is not the primary focus of this Brief, it is worth remembering that Iran has played and is continuing to play a central role in United States foreign policy. Although Iraq currently receives the lion's share of U.S. resources and attention, Iran is arguably in second place as an object of American rhetoric and concern. Accordingly, the opportunity to challenge Iran via Israel and Hezbollah was not a peripheral matter for U.S. policymakers. The war in Lebanon had direct implications with respect to the war in Iraq, the success of counter-proliferation efforts, the progress of democratization, the war against global terrorism, and the possibility of U.S. military intervention in Iran.

In sum, then, by supporting Israel and giving it wide latitude to prosecute the war in Lebanon, U.S. policy sought to:

1. let Israel enhance its national security by degrading an important adversary and countering the notion, based on the Israeli withdrawals from Lebanon (2000) and Gaza (2005), that Israel was weak and retreated in the face of Arab attacks. The Israeli attack could degrade Hezbollah directly—by destroying its assets—and/or indirectly, by compelling the Lebanese government to take control of the South;
2. help advance Lebanese democracy by allowing Israel to weaken the strongest antidemocratic, pro-Syrian force in Lebanon, Hezbollah;
3. gain the upper hand in America's proxy war with Iran, and send an intimidating message to Syria and other "rogue" regimes as well as to Iran; and
4. reinforce a central message of the war on terror: that terrorists of all stripes are evil and must be confronted by force.

Although this paper has emphasized Israel's military attacks as the primary means of weakening Hezbollah, the cease-fire

and post-war settlement were also part of U.S. strategy. Not only would Hezbollah be hurt by bombs, the United States and Israel hoped, but it would be further constrained by new rules created in the aftermath of the war. As described below, this meant that the exact wording of UN resolutions and other post-war stipulations was an important part of U.S. policy.

U.S. Policy during the War

U.S. policy during the Israel-Hezbollah war comprised two essential elements. First and most importantly, Washington rebuffed the calls from most countries for an early or immediate cease-fire. The United States wanted to make sure that Israel had the time to accomplish its military goals. Second, the United States played a central role in drafting the language of the cease-fire resolution and thereby establishing expectations for the post-war environment. Washington pressed for a sustainable cease-fire that would constrain Hezbollah and address what the United States saw as the root causes of the violence. Throughout the war, the United States also gave Israel rhetorical support, using language consistent with past American statements involving other fronts in the war on terror. (This paper is not addressing all aspects of U.S. policy, such as evacuating American citizens from Lebanon and supplying Israel with arms.)

There was no sense in the first week of the war that President Bush or Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice were feverishly working the phones in an effort to stop the fighting. The G-8 summit statement blamed the outbreak of violence on "extremist forces" ("[t]hese extremist elements and those that support them") rather than explicitly pointing the finger at Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria. But consistent with the American position, it did not call for an immediate cease-fire: "The most urgent priority is to create conditions for a cessation of violence that will be sustainable and lay the foundation for a more permanent solution."⁶ Amidst complaints that the United States was not using its diplomatic resources, and especially its close ties with Israel, to deal with the war, on July 21 Condoleezza Rice rejected the past U.S. model of intensive engagement: "... I could have gotten on a plane and rushed over and started shuttling and it wouldn't have been clear what I was shuttling to do."⁷ Rice delayed her visit to the region until July 24, twelve days after the start of the war, and she made a surprise stop in Beirut. She also met with many of the key parties to the war at a multilateral meeting in Italy. She traveled to the region again from July 29 to July 31.

What, then, did the United States hope to accomplish? Rice made clear what was *not* on the agenda: "... I have no interest in diplomacy for the sake of returning Lebanon and Israel to the status quo ante. I think it would be a mistake."⁸ Upon returning from the G-8 summit, President Bush elaborated that attendees

were able to reach a very strong consensus that the world must confront the root causes of the current instability. And the root cause of that current instability is terrorism and terrorist attacks on a democratic country. And part of those terrorist attacks are inspired by nation states, like Syria and Iran. And in order to be able to deal with this crisis, the world must

deal with Hezbollah, with Syria and to continue to work to isolate Iran.⁹

The United States, Rice said, sought a “sustainable” cease-fire, the same term used earlier in the G-8 statement.¹⁰ To be sustainable, a cease-fire could not leave the pre-July 12 balance of forces in place, in terms of either Israeli-Hezbollah military personnel or internal Lebanese political organizations. When Rice met with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on July 20, she opposed an immediate cease-fire resolution. Rice explained in Israel on July 24: “If we have learned anything, it is that any peace is going to have to be based on enduring principles and not on temporary solutions.”¹¹

Throughout this period, the Siniora government pleaded for an immediate cease-fire, and for humanitarian support in response to the loss of life, displacement, and property destruction caused by Israeli bombing. The United States called for the protection of both the Siniora government and the Lebanese people, but the calls had little impact in the face of its support for the Israeli bombing and its opposition to an immediate cease-fire. U.S. statements about Lebanese civilians and the Siniora government were always accompanied by a caveat that rendered the statements of little value. “Everybody abhors the loss of innocent life,” President Bush remarked. “On the other hand, what we recognize is that the root cause of the problem is Hezbollah. And that problem must be addressed, ...” With respect to Lebanon’s government, Bush explained: “Well, we have made it very clear that Israel should be allowed to defend herself. We’ve asked that as she does so, that she be mindful of the Siniora government. It’s very important that this government in Lebanon succeed and survive.”¹² The strong American support for Siniora in the summer of 2005 was diluted when a different calculus determined U.S. policy in the summer of 2006.

U.S. officials took a different view from the Siniora government, seeing the war on Hezbollah as a stiff dose of needed medicine for Lebanon. The short-term pain, it was felt, would yield significant gains in the long term by compelling the Lebanese government to take sovereign control over all its territory, including the South. At the same time, American officials sought to affect Israeli policy at the tactical level by pressing for limits on Israeli attacks on civilian infrastructure, such as bridges and Lebanon’s electricity grid.

Washington also sought to enlist the support of Arab leaders, but that effort produced mixed results. On July 14, Bush called several leaders and asked for help driving a wedge between Syria, on the one hand, and Hezbollah and Iran, on the other; King Abdullah of Jordan and President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt agreed.¹³ Initially, Saudi leaders and others criticized Hezbollah, but they probably expected the United States to reciprocate by reining in Israel. When, instead, Washington gave Israel a free hand, some Arab leaders soured on the idea of working with the United States. Saudi officials, including Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal, were disappointed by the results of a meeting with Bush and Condoleezza Rice in Washington on July 23. In August, however, the Arab League supported UNSC

Resolution 1701, thereby rebutting the charge that it was an illegitimate resolution imposed by outside powers on Arab actors.

France and the United States took the lead in negotiating the UNSC cease-fire resolution, a process that moved in fits and starts.¹⁴ Israel and the United States were initially hesitant to embrace the idea of an international force, but they soon warmed to the idea. On August 5, France and the United States announced that they had agreed on a two-step process, comprising an initial resolution to be followed a few weeks later by a second measure focused on the introduction of an international peacekeeping force into Lebanon. But this two-part approach met with significant opposition, including from both Israel and Lebanon. A few days later, agreement on any resolution appeared in doubt; some countries also objected to setting the resolution in the context of Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, the chapter that makes available to the UNSC the most coercive possible measures for the enforcement of resolutions. But on August 10–11, French and U.S. officials negotiated a new draft, one based on the less coercive Chapter VI. UNSC Resolution 1701 passed on August 11, 2006. The same day, Bush spoke by telephone to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for the first time since the capture of two Israeli soldiers on July 12.

During this negotiating process, Israel received written promises from the United States concerning the controversial Shebaa Farms area. According to one press report, the United States promised Israel that it would not be compelled to withdraw from the contested strip of land even if Kofi Annan and the United Nations determined that it belonged to Lebanon.¹⁵ This was not a foregone conclusion, as Fouad Siniora had seemingly convinced Condoleezza Rice earlier to get Israel to agree to an evacuation of the area as part of any resolution.¹⁶

Evaluating U.S. Policy: Did Washington Achieve Its Objectives?

As Shai Feldman noted in an earlier Middle East Brief, any assessment of winners and losers made just two months after the end of the fighting is necessarily tentative.¹⁷ Rather than come to any definitive conclusions, this section lays out many of the questions that will have to be answered in order to make more concrete judgments down the road. Using America’s objectives as a guide, the assessment provided here is quite mixed, with Lebanon’s democratization process suffering the most damage as of this interim evaluation.

1. Enhancing Israeli Security

U.S. policy during the Israel-Hezbollah war did not clearly enhance Israel’s security. On the positive side for the United States and Israel, Israel killed many Hezbollah fighters, and it captured a few that it could use for prisoner exchanges. A large amount of Hezbollah equipment was used or destroyed, though Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah claimed that Hezbollah still had 20,000 missiles. Many Hezbollah facilities in Lebanon were destroyed; and Hezbollah did not get back its prisoners or Shebaa Farms. Hezbollah’s calculus with regard to confronting Israel will surely change; given Israel’s enormous response, Hezbollah

will think harder before starting another round of fighting. The extent of the aerial bombing may give other would-be Israeli opponents pause, and the war sends a different message than did Israel's unilateral withdrawals from Lebanon (2000) and Gaza (2005).

On the other side of the ledger, Hezbollah fighters fought well against Israel on the ground, and they lasted longer than Arab armies had in most previous Arab-Israeli wars. By mid-August, one had the sense that Israel and Lebanon needed the cease-fire more than Hezbollah. Not only did Hezbollah fighters survive; they also effectively countered Israeli tanks, damaged an Israeli naval vessel, intercepted Israeli communications, and killed about 120 Israeli soldiers. Israel failed to stop Hezbollah's missiles, though these weapons' inaccuracy and Israel's civil defense measures meant that although many missiles were fired, there were few Israeli civilian casualties. Hezbollah also did not release the captured Israeli soldiers. Going toe-to-toe with Israel was a symbolic boost not only to Hezbollah and its allies but also to the global array of anti-Israel forces; other rejectionists, as a result, could be emboldened to challenge Israel in the future. The fact that some of Hezbollah's success was due to poor Israeli decisions and implementation will do little to diminish the Arab (and Muslim) sense of triumph.

But the war's aftermath remains uncertain. If the war constrains Hezbollah and leads to its disarmament, Israel will have achieved a major military success. To be clear, however, constraint and disarmament are two distinct goals. Hezbollah might be constrained by a) the presence of a more sizable international force in South Lebanon; b) the presence of the Lebanese Army in South Lebanon; c) the successful blockage of its rearmament, essentially by means of tighter borders with Syria; or d) pressure for restraint from within the Lebanese political system. It is not yet clear whether any or all of these four possibilities actually will constrain Hezbollah.

The role of Lebanon's army and the demands of Lebanese politics are linked together. The key question is whether Lebanese political actors at both the elite and grassroots levels will hold Hezbollah accountable for initiating the war and have the political will and strength to act on that conclusion.

As for disarmament, the same four factors come into play. Hezbollah remains defiant, with Hassan Nasrallah publicly rejecting disarming. Hezbollah fighters remain south of the Litani River in violation of Resolution 1701, though they have kept their weapons out of view. The international force, augmenting UNIFIL (the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon), is growing in size, but thus far there is little evidence that it will operate under the robust rules of engagement that would be necessary to actually disarm Hezbollah and end its status as a militia.¹⁸ There is no ambiguity in UNSC resolutions 1559 and 1701 with respect to the need for Hezbollah to disarm; the question is whether any force—specifically, the Lebanese government and army or UNIFIL—has sufficient political will and military strength to enforce that provision.

2. *Advancing Lebanese Democracy*

Lebanon's nascent democratization suffered greatly in the recent war, though if Hezbollah is either politically marginalized or forsakes anti-Israel violence in the medium term, that verdict could change. Lebanon's democracy was intertwined with both its economic recovery and the need to downplay intercommunal differences. Yet the war, and the Israeli bombing campaign in particular, damaged the economy and again highlighted sectarian divisions.

Israel's aerial bombing caused significant economic destruction. Predominantly Shiite neighborhoods in south Beirut were decimated, and Shiite areas in southern Lebanon were hit hard. Israel also hit infrastructure targets, including roads, bridges, factories, and the Beirut airport. Lebanon, which had done much to recover from the devastation of its civil war (1975–1990), was hit hard again. One question is whether international investors, be they of Lebanese ancestry or not, will give Lebanon another chance. Continuing economic difficulties would surely undermine efforts at political liberalization.

While sectarian identity did not disappear from Lebanon in the last decade, the war again brought communal differences to the fore. Sunni-Shiite conflicts in the region, as well as splits between Shiite Iran and Sunni Arab states, also have implications for Lebanon and its Sunni, Shia, Druze, and Maronite communities. Even an optimistic scenario, in which Lebanon's other political actors work to limit Hezbollah's role in Lebanese politics, might ignite sectarian divisions and tensions.

For the war to have facilitated Lebanon's drive for democracy, Hezbollah's role in the Lebanese political arena must change from a political actor still reliant on military force to a party embedded in the democratic political system. Hassan Nasrallah's victory speech on September 22 indicated a strong desire to embolden anti-Israeli forces across the region. If in the war's aftermath Hezbollah remains equally committed to the use of force—or, worse yet from an American perspective, more committed to attacking Israel—then the effort to advance Lebanese democracy through the support of Israeli military action will have failed. Hezbollah could shift toward total involvement in politics as a result of internal Lebanese machinations and/or Syria's choosing to distance itself from the movement as a result of the war—but little evidence has emerged that supports either an internal Lebanese or external Syrian pathway that is likely to emerge in the medium term. Some Lebanese and Arab leaders and opinion makers have spoken out against Hezbollah, but there has not been a groundswell of opposition, nor significant evidence that Hezbollah's core Shiite constituency is abandoning the movement.

At the same time, within Lebanon, Hezbollah does not appear to have *expanded* its political base. It may have miscalculated that non-Shiite Lebanese would rally around it in the face of an Israeli assault. It may have been thinking that all Arabs, regardless of religion, Islamic sect, or national interest, would repudiate Israel—a common enough dynamic in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yet, as Abdel Monem Said Aly noted in an earlier Middle East Brief, the Arab reaction during and after the war was not solely anti-Israel.

Some commentators, for example, criticized Hezbollah's reckless and provocative operation.¹⁹

Publicly, the United States regarded the outcome more positively in terms of regional democracy. Thus, Secretary of State Rice argued that "[t]he implementation of Resolution 1701 will not only benefit Lebanon and Israel; it also has important regional implications. Simply put: This is a victory for all who are committed to moderation and democracy in the Middle East—and a defeat for those who wish to undermine these principles with violence, particularly the governments of Syria and Iran."²⁰

3. Prosecuting the Proxy War with Iran

Assessments of American success with respect to the first two objectives directly affect the impact of United States policy with respect to Iran. The more the war looks like a military defeat for Hezbollah and the more Hezbollah loses power in the context of Lebanese politics, the more Iran's standing suffers. If Syria were to distance itself from Hezbollah and Iran, that would be a loss as well. In contrast, the more Hezbollah looks strong, both militarily and politically, coming out of the war, the better Iran looks as a reflection of its powerful protégé. Although the pieces are falling into place with regard to a diminution of Hezbollah's power—UNSC Resolution 1701, a larger UNIFIL, the Lebanese Army deployed to the South—there is little evidence as yet to indicate that a diminishment of Hezbollah's reach and power will actually result. It remains only a possible outcome.

One indication coming out of the war was whether Iran itself would be any less confrontational. But it did not back down with respect to its nuclear program, allowing an August 31, 2006, international deadline (to suspend its uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities) to pass without complying. During his September visit to the United Nations, Iranian president Mahmud Ahmadinejad was as defiant, as anti-American, and as anti-Israel as ever. These outward signs do not indicate that Iran has been intimidated or deterred by the war. The fact that Israel did not emerge with a quick and obvious military victory leaves Iran with greater room for maneuver than it would have had if Israel had conspicuously defeated Hezbollah.²¹

4. Prosecuting the War on Terror

The only objective regarding which Washington can claim some clear success is in demonstrating a zero tolerance policy with respect to terrorist organizations. The United States and Israel see Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, and the U.S. strongly backed Israel's military effort to damage Hezbollah. If the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq did not send a clear enough message, backing Israel is additional evidence that Washington is serious about the use of force against American adversaries.

One major overall downside to United States policy, however, was the human suffering it caused in Lebanon and the symbolic implications that had for the American image in the world. In the global war on terror, the U.S. has frequently talked about the need to win the battle of hearts and minds, but the war, and the images of bloody Lebanese children splashed across newspapers and satellite

television, did great damage in that regard, which even a well-run public diplomacy campaign would be extremely hard-pressed to undo.

In addition, Secretary of State Rice unintentionally confirmed the fears of many Arabs and Muslims with respect to American intentions when she said in Washington on July 21: "What we're seeing here, in a sense, is the ... birth pangs of a *new Middle East* and whatever we do we have to be certain that we're pushing forward to the new Middle East not going back to the old one."²² To many regional observers, the "new Middle East" was a neocolonial American project on which it unleashed its local tool, the Israeli military. Rice's poor choice of words was reminiscent of President Bush's use of the loaded term "crusade" in the days after September 11.

Evolving U.S. Policy toward the Conflict?

Since the end of the war, a debate conducted within the Bush administration about U.S. policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict has spilled out into the open. The Bush administration has generally rejected the notion that solving the Arab-Israeli conflict will in any way help the United States fight the war on terror or improve the image of America in the Arab world. Bush officials have studiously avoided linking concessions and diplomacy on the Arab-Israeli front to the war on terror; they do not want to appear to be making concessions under duress.

On September 15, however, Philip Zelikow, counselor to the State Department, seemed to suggest a U.S. policy shift. Speaking at a Washington Institute for Near East Policy conference, Zelikow observed that the U.S. coalition against Iran was, in part, dependent on European and Arab states. These Arab states would be less likely to support the United States on Iran policy if the U.S. did not press for more action on the Arab-Israeli track:

For the Arab moderates and for the Europeans, some sense of progress and momentum on the Arab-Israeli dispute is just a *sine qua non* for their ability to cooperate actively with the United States on a lot of other things that we care about. We can rail against that belief; we can find it completely justifiable, but it's fact. That means an active policy on the Arab-Israeli dispute is an essential ingredient to forging a coalition that deals with the most dangerous problems.²³

Iran is not the only issue on which the United States needs Arab and European support, but it is a very important one. Zelikow's keynote address at the conference (entitled "Building Security in the Broader Middle East") and his subsequent remarks sparked a strong reaction and led other American officials to state that U.S. policy was not changing. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack wrote that there was "no change in policy. The issues of Iran and Israeli-Palestinian interaction each have their own dynamic, and we are not making a new linkage between the two issues. Nothing in Philip's remarks should be interpreted as laying out or even hinting at a change in policy."²⁴ In a meeting with the Israeli foreign minister, Tsipi Livni, Condoleezza Rice assured her that the United States was not linking Iran and Israeli-Palestinian issues.²⁵

Interestingly, this whole discussion is in part a reaction to Arab leaders who feel that the war emboldened Iran, and that they therefore need to work with the United States to lower Iran's standing. Their fear is that events on the Arab-Israeli front, and more specifically the Hezbollah-Israel war, have helped Iran—and that a stronger Iran, in turn, has negative implications for a range of issues, including nuclear proliferation, regional leadership, the Shia-Sunni rivalry, and terrorism. The logic reflected in Zelikow's speech is that under another set of circumstances, in which Iran's proxies were weakened, marginalized, and pushed into politics rather than terrorism, Iran would suffer, with consequent benefits across the same range of issues.

At a minimum, the Zelikow speech might foreshadow a renewed American interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The United States has not aggressively pursued a bilateral peace process since former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon first pushed his unilateral disengagement plan in December 2003. So whether or not a new U.S. policy linking the Iran and Arab-Israeli issues is in development, there might still be a realization that after this summer's war, allowing the Arab-Israeli conflict to drift could have dangerous consequences. On the Iran issue, the United States has at least pledged to work with Arab states. "[Y]ou have to rally likeminded states who are fearful of Iranian power," observed Secretary of State Rice in a radio interview, "moderate states who don't want Iran to extend its power into the region. That's why we work with states in the Gulf; that's why we work with moderate Arab states to check Iranian ambitions."²⁶

By late September, the United States began to hint at greater engagement in Arab-Israeli matters. At the United Nations on September 19, President Bush noted that he was sending Rice to the region as well as working with Britain, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia; he called a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "one of the great objectives of my presidency." Bush himself is said to be considering a trip to the region. In early October, Condoleezza Rice traveled to the region seeking to achieve small improvements on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Her trip, if followed by other initiatives, could signal a new level of involvement.

Endnotes

1 Hezbollah's national goal included the expulsion of Israeli forces from Lebanon. It continues to pursue this goal in Shebaa Farms even though Israel believes the farms are an Israeli-Syrian matter—as the United Nations confirmed when it certified Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. Hezbollah also has larger goals, including defeating Israel on Israeli territory; the impact of the recent war on Hezbollah's aspirations has been much debated. But I think that Hezbollah's goals, however defined, fall short of the sort of global objectives espoused by al-Qaeda—whose main adversary, unlike Hezbollah's, is the world's lone superpower, the United States. As noted later in the text, Hezbollah has not attacked a United States target since the 1980s (with the exception of one individual who was part of a 1996 attack in Saudi Arabia).

2 For more details on Hezbollah's status on various U.S. lists of terrorist organizations, see [Jeremy M. Sharp, "Lebanon: The Israel-Hamas-Hezbollah Conflict," Congressional Research Service updated August 14, 2006](#), p. 48.*

3 U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2005*, released April 2006, pp. 197–199.

4 [U.S. Department of State, "Remarks with Maronite Patriarch of Lebanon Nasrallah Sfeir before Their Meeting," July 18, 2006](#)*; and [U.S. Department of State, "Special Briefing on Travel to the Middle East and Europe," July 21, 2006](#).* Rice made a number of similar statements on July 16, 2006.

5 For a general description of Bush's thinking, see Michael Abramowitz, "In Mideast Strife, Bush Sees a Step to Peace," *Washington Post*, July 21, 2006.

6 [The White House, "Statement by Group of Eight Leaders," July 16, 2006](#).*

7 "Special Briefing on Travel to the Middle East and Europe."

8 Ibid.

9 [The White House, "President Bush Meets with Bipartisan Members of Congress on the G8 Summit," July 18, 2006](#).*

10 "Special Briefing on Travel to the Middle East and Europe."

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