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Sharing blame in the Middle East

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WHO is to blame for the Middle East meltdown?

This partly lies at the door of Israel's enemies, notably Syria and Iran, supporters of Hizbollah and Hamas. But part of the blame also lies with Israel and the United States. The reason for Syria and Iran supporting Hizbollah and Hamas goes to the heart about the relationship between democracy, modernity and secularism – a debate which rages, ironically, not only in the Islamic world, but in its *bete noire*, the Jewish state of Israel.

Blaming Israel's enemies

UN Arab Development Reports consistently argue that the Arab-Israeli conflict is not the key regional problem, but the main challenge is reconciling the Arab world's application of Islam with modernity, and the failure of their own regimes to provide for their citizens. While Jordan and the Gulf states have become important modernisers, their regional catalytic impact is reduced by their small population numbers.

The struggle within the Arab world, which also centres on the relationship between Islam, nationalism and primordial ties, for the moment is overwhelmingly being resolved in favour of those advocating a retreat to 'authenticity', i.e. conservative Islam. This has triggered a new movement believing that the reason for failure is 'Westoxication' – intoxication by the West. Previously the reason advanced for widespread economic and social decline was the incapacity to Westernise.

As a result, the public space in many Islamic and especially Arab countries is increasingly governed by religion. Theocratic concerns hold sway over individual rights. Democracy is less likely where relationships are not identified by national questions but by group ties. Look only at the way in which Iraqis have voted for example. Sectarian, primordial ties may be taking a different regional political form now: Witness Shia Iran's regional ascendancy, the militant activism of its client Hizbollah, Shia-held power in Iraq, and the growing concern region-wide of the Sunnis led now by Saudi Arabia's criticism of Hizbollah.

The rockets fired from Lebanon and Gaza are thus both a symptom of these currents and also a tactic related to more immediate issues.

Blaming Israel

Some of the blame also lies at the door of Israel.

Both Hamas and Hizbollah have geared their activities for a range of reasons, not least to attract attention to the plight of the 9,000-10,000 Arab, Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. The use of rockets to do so was evidence of a more fundamental issue, which may decide whether Israel can unilaterally withdraw from the occupied territories: That Israel's deterrent impact on these groups had worn off over the past six years since it withdrew from Lebanon and in the ten months since it left Gaza. The massive Israeli response is partly to re-establish that deterrence, many Israelis believe.

Israel also faces a profound internal challenge similar to many Arab states -- between liberalism and fundamentalism, a tension which had until now been resolved in favour of those driving it to a peace settlement. Those on the religious right do not want Israel to hand over territory to the Palestinians, either through negotiation or, as happened with Gaza, unilaterally. Yet if Israel does not disengage, it risks undermining the two fundamental tenets of the state of Israel: A Jewish majority enjoying international legitimacy and support. Israel's five million Jews will, by around 2015, likely be outnumbered by Arabs, today totalling 3.5 million in the West Bank and Gaza, 1.2 million in Israel itself and more than 3.5 million in the diaspora. The threat posed to the 'Jewishness' of their state explains why Israelis are not prepared to accept Palestinian demands on the right of return of refugees.

It is thus in Israel's interests to create a two-state Palestine-Israel reality as quickly as possible. To do so, it has to go against the grain of its religious fundamentalists and also undo a fair bit of Israeli military mythology.

Just as Israel's military prowess and defeats of Arab foes are celebrated in national lore, these inflict a cost beyond the impact in forcing a retreat to Arab conservatism. For example, whereas Israel's crushing defeat of Arab forces in the 1967 Six-Day War is viewed widely as a victory, it may yet prove a strategic defeat by grabbing the West Bank. This was not a security imperative in terms of staving off the threat to Israel. Instead the land grabbed in the arrogance of victory created today's Palestinian demographic Trojan Horse within the Jewish state.

It is now in the Palestinian interest to wait this out, given that demographics and time are on their side. Hence the need for Israel, in its mind, to now re-establish the political rules of the region through its military action precisely to enable it to carry out the unilateral disengagement necessary for its survival as a Jewish entity. If Israel does not extricate itself from the occupied territories by 2010 it could find itself locked into a one-state reality in which would disappear the basis of the Zionist enterprise -- a Jewish majority state after 2,000 years of being an oft-persecuted minority in other states.

The diplomatic blame

Part of the blame must however lie at the door of the United States as the enabling regional diplomatic force.

Washington's relative indifference to this simmering and growing crisis has been partly due to its distraction with regional troubles elsewhere, including in Iraq and Afghanistan. Whatever the cause, it has contributed directly to what is happening on the ground now. Without a major US diplomatic intervention, the result of the current crisis could be the destruction of swathes of Gaza and southern Lebanon. If so, this could sow the seeds for

another round of the same in the near future – all of this ensuring a peace settlement remains a distant dream.

A settlement will also require greater European involvement. To this end it has been suggested by former Spanish prime minister José Maria Aznar that Israel should be included in the NATO alliance. While he recognises that this will ‘present some political difficulties’, it is an idea that should not be dismissed overnight. Bringing Israel -- and hopefully in time other Middle Eastern countries -- more closely into the European fold would help to placate existential security concerns, more firmly commit Europe to dealing with the region’s problems and, arguably most importantly and symbolically, help to bury the ghosts of European indifference to the Holocaust.

Prospects for peace

Would an Israeli-Palestine peace douse Islamic anger worldwide? Although Israel is not the reason for the decline in power of Arab states, it is a painful reminder. The absence of a political settlement is a source of widespread ire in the Muslim world. Of course a political settlement can only happen if both sides want peace. But a settlement is more likely when there are political issues at stake; and less so if it has to reconcile religious beliefs. The longer the impasse drags on, the less political and more intractably theocratic will the Israeli-Arab divide inevitably become, complicated by a deepening Shia-Sunni regional schism.

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