

THE MIDDLE EAST MESS

The escalating conflict in the Middle East has already resulted in a situation where there will be no winners. Anyone that believes that short-term military gains will result in long-term security gains is miscalculating the regional dynamics in the Middle East. What is most surprising so far in the current conflict unfolding between Israel and Lebanon is that both Israel and its main ally, the United States, do not seem to comprehend the negative perceptual backlash that this crisis will unleash throughout the Arab street if allowed to escalate any further.

While Israel has every right to defend itself, its disproportionate use of force is illegitimate under international rules that outlaw the collective punishment of entire populations that have already resulted in the heavy loss of civilian life. In many ways Hizbollah's sustained rocketing of Israel over the past two weeks proves that Israel's fear of an attack one day from the north was correct. But Israel should also be aware that its eighteen-year occupation of Lebanon starting in 1982 only created a new generation of hatred and legitimised the actions of extremists such as Hizbollah in the eyes of their people.

Destroying the infrastructure of Lebanon that has spent the last decade rebuilding itself after decades of civil war will only further sow the seeds of hatred among the Lebanese and the rest of the Arab world. One of the most important strategic factors that Israel needs to realise is that its security interests will be best served by having politically stable and economically prosperous countries around it. The creation of a ring of failed states around it which will emerge if the Middle East conflict sucks in other regional players such as Syria and Iran will only result in future decades of instability on Israel's doorstep.

It is common knowledge that a conflict in the region that provides more than sixty per cent of the world's proved oil reserves is going to adversely impact on the global economy if unchecked. This basic fact and the increasing death of innocent civilians dictates that the international community must stand up and be counted at such a crucial moment in Middle East relations. It is actually quite astonishing that it has taken more than two weeks of open conflict before the so-called patrons of peace in the Middle East, namely the Quartet comprising the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia, were able to come together in Rome to discuss a way out of the Middle East imbroglio.

As the only superpower in the post-Cold War international system, the United States must realise that unless it wields its influence in the Middle East to broker a cease-fire in the current conflict between Israel and Hamas and Hizbollah, its foreign policy objective of creating a democratic and prosperous Middle East will ring hollow for at least the next two decades of the twenty-first century. It is thus essential that the United States applies its political will to move the main players in the current Middle East conflict to the negotiating table as soon as possible.

The basic parameters of at least an initial compromise between the warring factions are well known. They need to include the immediate enforcement of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 that calls for the disbanding and disarming of all militias in

the region, the extension of the Lebanese government's authority to the southern part of the country, and the deployment of an effective international peace-keeping force to assist the Lebanese army keep the peace along its border with Israel and prevent the rearming of any militia. A brokered cease-fire also needs to include a commitment to return to the 1949 Israel-Lebanon armistice agreement with a joint border demarcation committee to deal with outstanding territorial disputes including Israeli withdrawal from the Shaaba farms. A credible ceasefire must also include a commitment to negotiate a prisoner exchange between Israel and Lebanon and an international commitment to fund the reconstruction of Lebanon.

In the medium term Israel must accept a viable Palestinian state formed on the basis of the 1967 borders adjusted through negotiation and agreement. The Palestinians and all Arabs must also accept Israel's right to exist as a peaceful neighbour and both states will need to share Jerusalem as their capital.

With such an overwhelming agenda to deal with the international community cannot stand by any longer but must find a way of engaging all regional players, including Syria and Iran, that are key contributors to the current Middle East mess. Unless the extra regional powers with influence in the region act decisively and signal that they are prepared to serve as guarantors of a new Middle East peace, the entire world will end up paying a very high price for the attitude of indifference we have seen so far.

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