ISRAEL VS. THE NEW ISLAMIST AXIS

Martin Kramer*

The following article was adapted from a lecture presented at a GLORIA Center conference entitled "After Lebanon: A New Middle East?," made possible by the generosity of Mr. Joel Sprayregen.

This article discusses how the 2006 Lebanon War marked the beginning of a third and new phase in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Israeli-Islamist conflict. It argues that the reversal of the tide driven by the Iranian Revolution is the only way for a new Middle East to come about.

The 2006 war has been analyzed from every conceivable angle. Yet I think the debates about who won and who lost obscure the deeper significance of the war: The 2006 Lebanon War marks the beginning of the third stage in the conflict over Israel.

Let me explain what I mean with a bit of abbreviated history. In the first stage, from Israel's creation in 1948 through 1973, the rejection of Israel dressed itself as pan-Arab nationalism. In the classic Arab-Israeli conflict, Arab states formed alliances in the name of Arab unity. They aimed to isolate Israel and to build an Arab coalition that could wage war against Israel on two or more fronts. This was the classic phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This was the era of Arab unity plans and pan-Arab treaties and alliances all directed against Israel.

The flaw of this strategy lay in the weakness of pan-Arabism itself. Arab states simply could not agree on objectives or on strategies to achieve them. The resulting failure of Arab states to coordinate led them to humiliating defeats in multi-front Arab-Israeli wars in 1948 and 1967. In 1973, Egypt and Syria did launch a well-coordinated surprise Arab assault on Israel with partial success. Egypt then opted out of the Arab collective by reaching a separate peace with Israel in 1979, and the Arab-Israeli conflict came to an end.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict took its place. In this second stage, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) used a mix of politics and armed struggle to open up new fronts against Israel: in Jordan and Lebanon, in the heyday of the *fedayin*; in the West Bank and in Gaza, during the first intifada; and in Israel proper in the second. However, the Palestinian struggle also stalled as the PLO grew inefficient and corrupt. Its absorption into the ramshackle Palestinian Authority (PA) only amplified its weaknesses.

The Palestinian movement under Yasir Arafat never really developed a coherent strategy. It lurched from policy to policy according to the whim of one deeply flawed man; and when Arafat died in 2004, his demise effectively marked the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the third and present stage, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been superseded by the Israeli-Islamist conflict. There had always been an Islamist component to the resistance against Israel. One could trace it all the way back 60 years, but it had always played a supporting role, first to the Arab

states and then to the PLO. It was Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Islamist revolution in Iran, who pioneered an entirely different vision of the role Islamism should play opposite Israel.

Khomeini rejected the view that Israel had become a *fait accompli*. He wasn't impressed by Israeli victories or Israeli power, because he believed that Israel was an offense against the heavens. It was, he thought, a test of belief put to Muslims, something that the Almighty would help them to undo if Muslims returned to true belief. Khomeini believed that Islam had the power to call forth the sacrifice and discipline needed to deny legitimacy to Israel and ultimately to defeat it.

To achieve that goal, Khomeini said Islamists couldn't rest content with a supporting role; they had to push themselves to the front. By establishing Hizballah as an armed vanguard in Lebanon, Khomeini sought to open a new Islamist front against Israel, independent of the weak Arab states and the ineffective PLO. Hizballah, from the moment of its creation, sent out exactly one message: Israel should be met only with resistance, which would ultimately be victorious.

The resistance alternative built up a bit of steam in the 1990s as Islamist movements gained ground across the Middle East. We think of these years as the "peace process" years, because we were mesmerized by the signing ceremonies on the White House lawn. Yet far from the lawns of Washington, Islamists were building momentum. The Palestinian Islamist movement, Hamas, filled the vacuum left by the PLO's incompetence. It began to flex its muscles by launching resistance without seeking the approval of the PLO. Hizballah waged a successful campaign to end the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon, much to the astonishment of the Arab world, which had come to believe that Israel left land only in return for peace treaties.

Yet while Islamists rejected peace with Israel and called for resistance, they didn't yet challenge the prerogative of the Arab states and the PLO to design a grand strategy toward Israel; that is, until this past year.

Now, two developments have put the Islamists in the driver's seat. First, Palestinian elections in January 2006 carried Hamas to power in the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas has regarded the elections as much more than a mandate to substitute good governance for PLO corruption. They see it as a mandate to bend Palestinian strategy to the Islamist vision of gradual attrition of Israel.

Second, Iran's nuclear drive under President Ahmadinejad has revitalized the idea that Israel can be confronted on the external front. The possible combination of Iranian nukes, Hizballah rockets, and Hamas resistance has electrified the Muslim world. People ask themselves: Might the forces of Islamism acting together in concert achieve the victory that eluded the Arab states and the PLO? Might they make it possible once more to wage a multi-front war against Israel? Might an Islamist coalition achieve greater success by tapping the self-sacrificial spirit of Islam?

Last summer brought the Islamist coalition into play against Israel for the first time. We know that it wasn't the war that Iran would have chosen. Iranian strategy would have deployed the coalition at a moment of its own choosing, probably closer to the make-or-break moment in Iran's nuclear plans. Yet Israel preferred to meet the challenge early by launching what was, effectively, a preemptive war against Hizballah's missiles, rockets, and infrastructure.

The verdict on the war is still out. However, the war does offer some glimpses into the possible character of this Israeli-Islamist conflict by showing the intrinsic strengths and weaknesses of this Islamist coalition. The strengths of the Islamist coalition include ideological discipline and leadership authority.

The ideology purports to be authentic and efficiently mobilizes all the pent-up resentment against Israel and the West. The leaders—Nasrallah is only one of them—personify the spirit of defiance that is over-valued in their societies, and they command nearly total obedience. Training is exacting. Everyone follows orders, and, as we saw in the summer, no one surrenders.

The Islamist coalition also brings together a very flexible mix of assets, comprised, as it is, of a state actor (Iran), a quasi-state actor (Hamas), and a sub-state actor (Hizballah). They have developed innovative weapons systems, with suicide bombings and rockets that go over and around Israel's conventional strengths.

In the Lebanon War, there was evidence that this kind of mix could be very effective in identifying and exploiting Israel's vulnerabilities. Moreover, if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, this would give the Islamist coalition a card no previous coalition, no previous adversary, has held. Nuclear weapons in Iran's hands would transform Israel's small size from an advantage—and it has been an advantage; for example, short lines of supply—into a liability, a total vulnerability to one strike. An Iranian nuclear weapon could transform the Israeli-Islamist conflict into a dangerous game in which periodic nuclear alert crises could bring about the economic, the political, and even the demographic attrition of Israel.

On the other side of the ledger, the Islamist coalition also has weaknesses.

First, as has been mentioned, its backbone is Shi'a. Some Sunnis, including Islamists, see the coalition as a threat to traditional Sunni primacy as much as it is a threat to Israel. Saudi Arabia in particular has been mobilizing against the Iranian-led coalition, which makes it more difficult for the coalition to keep Sunni Islamists in its orbit. Moreover, while the coordination between Iran and Hizballah is, I believe, total, Hamas does have its own approach, which reflects its own predicament and constraints imposed by the Arab states on which it depends.

The other major weakness of the Islamist coalition is its lack of direct access to Israel's borders. The unmarked turf between Israel and the West Bank has been closed off by Israel's separation barrier, to the detriment of Hamas. In the summer war, Hizballah did lose its exclusive control of Lebanon's border with Israel, which was arguably the most significant strategic outcome of the war. Without access to Israel's borders, the Islamist coalition cannot control a sustained war of attrition with Israel. Moreover, if the coalition uses its rocket arsenal—its remaining offensive capability—this effectively licenses Israel to retaliate with devastating force. The coalition's offensive option is presently reduced to the firing of Qassam rockets from Gaza.

So consider the paradox: Islamists are very full of themselves now, believing they have achieved tremendous gains, and yet never before have Israel's borders been so inaccessible to its adversaries, Islamists included. Moreover, without Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, the Islamist coalition is likely to remain blocked unless and until it includes an Arab state or Arab territory that neighbors Israel. Syria, of course, is an obvious candidate for that role, but its present leadership acts as an ally of

the coalition and not a full-fledged member in it. Until now, it has kept its own border with Israel closed to any resistance. There are also Islamist political movements in Egypt and Jordan that would eagerly join the coalition, but they are presently kept at bay by the regimes.

Given these limitations, the Israeli-Islamist conflict doesn't yet define the new Middle East, but it could come to define it if the Islamist coalition gains more military and political power than it already enjoys.

As I indicated a moment ago, a nuclear Iran would take us into an entirely different scenario. It would be the crowning achievement of Khomeini's revolution. It would be read everywhere as a crucial step to transforming his theory of resistance into a practical reality. Experts in think-tanks may convince themselves that it wouldn't matter or that a kind of balance of terror would be established; however, in the Middle East itself, a nuclear era would be understood as a dramatic shift in the balance of power away from the United States, Israel, and Arab regimes and towards the Islamist coalition.

It would strengthen Hizballah dramatically and would draw in Hamas and other Sunni movements. It would prevent Palestinians from ever reconciling themselves to Israel's existence. It would persuade Syria to deepen its alliance with Iran. It would persuade Arabs that existing peace treaties were acts of surrender. This would leave moderate Arab regimes feeling shame-faced and embolden their domestic opponents to demand abrogation of all agreements with Israel. It likely would spawn al-Qa'ida-like movements or groups, all seeking suitcase bombs for detonation in Tel Aviv and elsewhere.

I conclude. It is conventional wisdom that the root problem of the Middle East is the Arab-Israeli conflict. If only it were resolved, the Middle East could be turned around. That is a very outdated notion. The Arab-Israeli conflict entered on a track toward resolution in the mid-1970s. It made remarkable if fitful progress through a series of formal and tacit agreements, beginning with the Egyptian-Israeli peace accords and continuing through Oslo.

What derailed that process at crucial moments was Islamist extremism as inspired in large measure by Iran's revolution. There is, indeed, a core problem in the Middle East, but it is not the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is radical Islamism and the power accrued to its champion, Iran.

Until the fever of radical Islamism subsides and until Iran's drive for regional power is broken, their influence will effectively block any initiative for change. A prior condition for a new Middle East, then, must be a reversal of the tide driven by Iran's revolution. Any other approach is a meaningless panacea of self-delusion bound to end in failure.

The only way to reverse that tide is for the United States to do what it failed to do in 1979. Someone in the White House must do what the feckless Jimmy Carter didn't do nearly three decades ago: face down Iran's radicals. That someone must promise Iran and the world that there will be no nuclear weapons in the hands of an Islamist coalition led by millenarian visionaries in Iran. That leader must take practical steps to ensure that this promise is in fact honored.

Martin Kramer is the Wexler-Fromer fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and senior fellow at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem and the Olin Institute at Harvard.