



Iran Against the Arabs

By Michael Rubin

The Arab states' reaction to Israel's assault on Hezbollah and Lebanon has been surprisingly tolerant. This should not be read as Arab acceptance of Israel as a state; rather, it is an indication of fear of a greater threat: Iran.

After Hamas kidnapped nineteen-year-old Corporal Gilad Shalit on June 25, Israeli forces launched an assault on Gaza to win his release. Arab condemnation was swift. Saudi Arabia's pro-government *al-Jazira* daily called Israel "a society of terrorists." Egypt's state-controlled *al-Gumhuriyah* condemned Israel's "heinous crimes" in Gaza. Following a July 8 meeting in Tehran, foreign ministers from countries neighboring Iraq denounced the "brutal Israeli attacks."

The crisis escalated four days later when Hezbollah terrorists infiltrated Israel's northern border and kidnapped two soldiers. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert called the raid "an act of war," and directed the military to launch an all-out assault on Hezbollah and targets throughout Lebanon. Neither Lebanese nor regional reaction to the opening of a second front was what Hezbollah expected. On July 14, Hezbollah's *al-Manar* called upon "all Lebanese people to rally behind the Islamic resistance" and to fight Israel's "flagrant aggression."

They didn't. No longer subject to Syrian occupation, Lebanese officials spoke freely. The Middle East Media Research Institute translated many reactions. "Lebanon . . . is not willing to be the spearhead of the Arab-Israeli conflict," former president Amin Gemayel said. "Hezbollah will have to explain itself to the Lebanese,"

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Druze leader Walid Jumblatt told *Le Figaro*. The independent Beirut daily *al-Mustaqbal* quoted Lebanese communications minister Marwan Hamada saying, "Syrian Vice President Faruq al-Shara gives the commands, Hezbollah carries them out, and Lebanon is the hostage."

Nor did the wider Arab world rally in unanimity toward Hezbollah. "A distinction must be made between legitimate resistance and uncalculated adventures undertaken by elements [without] . . . consulting and coordinating with Arab nations," the official Saudi Press Agency opined. Egyptian foreign minister Ahmed Abul Gheit included Hezbollah rocket attacks in his condemnation of terrorism. Even the Arab League, which seldom misses an opportunity to denounce Israel, offered only muted criticism. True, League secretary general Amr Moussa condemned Israel's "disproportionate attack," after the July 15 meeting, but rather than just slam the Jewish state, Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, chided Hezbollah's "unexpected, inappropriate, and irresponsible acts." Delegates from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates backed Mr. al-Faisal. Ahmed al-Jarallah, editor of Kuwait's *Arab Times*, condemned both Hezbollah and Hamas in an editorial that same day, writing, "Unfortunately we must admit that in such a war the only way to get rid of 'these irregular phenomena' is what Israel is doing."

It may be tempting to think that acceptance of Israel is in the air. But such optimism is unfounded.

There is no change of heart in Riyadh, Cairo, or Kuwait. Saudi princes still finance Palestinian terror. Rather, the recent Arab tolerance toward Israel's predicament and condemnation of Hezbollah signal recognition of a greater threat on the horizon. Wadi Batti Hanna, a columnist in Iraq's Arab nationalist *al-Ittijah al-Akhar* daily, put it bluntly when, on July 15, he asked, "How long will the Arabs continue to fight on behalf of Iran?"

The Iranian menace is rising. Condoleezza Rice's May 31 announcement that the Bush administration would engage Iran signaled U.S. weakness across the Middle East. "Why don't you admit that you are weak and your razor is blunt?" the Iranian supreme leader asked rhetorically four days later, as crowds in Tehran called for America's death. An Iranian Revolutionary Guards boat recently unveiled a banner reading, "U.S. cannot do a damn thing," as it sailed past a U.S. navy ship in the Persian Gulf. Tehran's confidence is high.

Even as Arab states routinely condemn U.S. foreign policy, they embrace the American umbrella. John Mearsheimer and Steven Walt, respectively of the University of Chicago and Harvard, may argue that "the Israel lobby" perverts U.S. interests; but Arab leaders understand that the only countries the U.S. military has fought to protect in the Middle East were Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The tiny Gulf emirates are defenseless without U.S. protection. There is hardly a state on the Arabian Peninsula that does not train with the U.S. military or welcome a small U.S. presence. But with U.S. congressmen proclaiming the defeat and vulnerability of U.S. troops in Iraq, and the Islamic Republic drawing closer to its nuclear goals, Tehran's stock is rising at U.S. expense.

Arab Uneasiness

The signs of Arab unease have been growing over the last eighteen months. Jordan's King Abdullah II first raised alarm. In a December 12, 2004, interview with Chris Matthews, he warned that the rise of Iranian-backed Shiite parties in Iraq could give rise to a Shiite "crescent" stretching from Iran to Lebanon. Abdulaziz

Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, called Abdullah's comments "ridiculous," but the remarks resonated in Arab countries. True, the Shiites might account for only 10 percent of the world's Muslims, but in the volatile region stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to Iran, the Sunnis and Shiites are near parity. That Shiites predominate in the oil-producing regions not only of Iran and Iraq but also Saudi Arabia accelerates those fears. Satellite stations throw fuel on the fire. A July 12 political cartoon in the Iraqi daily *al-Mutammar* depicted a man pouring gasoline labeled sectarianism into a satellite dish.

The power of satellite stations to inflame sectarian passion is extraordinary. I was in Sweileh, Jordan, as news broke last November that Iraqi Shiite militias had tortured Sunni prisoners in detention. Al-Jazeera replayed the footage in gory detail. Cafes hushed and men shouted abuse at television screens. More recently, al-Jazeera amplified Osama bin Laden's July 1 Internet message blaming "the people of the [Shiite] south" for violating Sunni cities like Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul. The situation worsened when Iranian-backed Shiite militiamen rampaged through the mixed Hay al-Jihad neighborhood on July 9, demanding identity cards and killing anyone with a Sunni name.

Most Arabs perceive Israel as small. Egypt—home to one of every three Arabs—has enjoyed a cold peace with Israel for more than a quarter-century. Gulf States, on the whole, would rather make money than directly fight Israel. While they do not like Israel's existence, Jerusalem presents no threat. Not so Tehran. A giant with 70 million people, Iran is no status quo power. Its ideological commitment to export revolution is real. Across Lebanon and the region, Arab leaders see Hezbollah for what it is: an arm of Iranian influence waging a sectarian battle in the heart of the Middle East.

An old Arab proverb goes, "Me against my brother; me and my brother against our cousin; and me, my brother and my cousin against the stranger." Forced to make a choice, Sunni Arabs are deciding: the Jews are cousins; the Shiites, strangers. U.S. diplomats may applaud the new pragmatism, but the reason behind it is nothing to celebrate.

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