

Reactions in the Arab World: Blurring the Traditional Lines

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One of the interesting aspects of the conflict between Hizbollah and Israel relates to positions that Arab states have taken on the unfolding developments. In an unusual step, immediately after news broke of the kidnapping of the IDF soldiers on the northern border, Egypt and Jordan spoke out against Hizbollah; they described the actions of the organization as inappropriate and irresponsible. The Saudi foreign minister joined the harsh criticism and added that Hizbollah's actions are an uncalculated adventure that sets the region back years and endangers the Arab world "without having received approval from the central government and without coordination with Arab states." These positions were reiterated at an emergency session of the Arab League that convened four days after the Hizbollah attack to deliberate the developments in the north. The assembly disclosed the differences of opinion in the Arab world regarding Hizbollah, with Syria, the main supporter of the organization among Arab states, taking a position contrary to that of the moderate states.

Against the backdrop of the stances expressed against Hizbollah in the first week of fighting, US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack noted that the states that criticized the organization – in other words, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia – will have an important role to play in exerting pressure on the states that support Hizbollah, i.e., Syria and Iran. Several days later it was reported that the Saudi king had discussed the situation in Lebanon with the Iranian president, and later the Saudi foreign minister traveled to the US for talks with President Bush and Secretary

of State Condoleezza Rice. Are we in fact witnessing new regional dynamics, characterized by different public fault lines within the Arab world?

The position of the three aforesaid states in this matter is indeed significant and reflects their willingness to deviate clearly and publicly from the accepted pattern of automatic condemnation of Israel whenever Israel fights against any Arab element. In so doing they have revealed differences of opinion on a subject that generally provides fertile ground for creating a consensus. Moreover, such declarations challenge traditionally held positions in the Arab public, and

thereby accentuate the gaps between the governments and the population in these states.

The explanation for the unusual responses of the three states lies in the wider regional context. In fact, the reactions against Hizbollah reflect the frustration of the moderate states not only with Islamic extremism but also, and perhaps primarily, with the actions of Iran – in particular, its attempts to strengthen its regional standing via its nuclear program. The three states that condemned Hizbollah are Arab states that are highly concerned with Iran's nuclear activity, although it is difficult for them to

express this concern openly due not only to their real fear of Iran, but because of a prevalent norm that makes it difficult to condemn Iran's nuclear program as long as there is no determined opposition to Israel (which is perceived as a nuclear power).

In the current crisis, Hizbollah's aggression on Israel's sovereign soil without any provocation on Israel's part made it a prime target for condemnation and offered a double reward. Arab states succeeded in conveying a direct message to Hizbollah – an organization that symbolizes the threat posed by Islamic extremists – and an indirect message to Iran, which supports Hizbollah. In leveling their criticism against the organization's military action, the states were careful not to lay explicit blame at Iran's door, but rather chose the route of implicit innuendo. Thus without addressing the question of the exact nature of relations between Iran and Hizbollah – whether we are talking about a puppet organization, or an organization that is far more motivated by domestic Lebanese considerations, or something in between the two – what we clearly see is that there is a link between Iran and Hizbollah in terms of the similar attitudes they generate among other

states: both are considered to be elements that endanger stability in the Middle East. Iran's clear and public support of Hizbollah's current actions only serves to strengthen the concern and frustration with the organization.

At the same time, there is no doubt that the position expressed by the three states is in itself tenuous. Mubarak denied reports in the Israeli media of an Egyptian-Jordanian-Saudi front against Hizbollah, and blocked Secretary of State Rice's official visit to Cairo aimed at enlisting the moderate Arab states against Iran and Syria, with the excuse that it was not suitable for Egypt to host Rice while the IDF bombed Beirut. At the meeting of the Saudi delegation with President Bush and Secretary of State Rice in Washington, Saudi officials were careful to avoid anything that might be construed as if Saudi Arabia were acting as an emissary of the US. This shows that the positions of the three states might easily change.

On the other hand, due to the wider regional context in which the three states expressed their position, the stance they have taken against Hizbollah is important and offers potential for serving as a basis to

strengthen the more moderate voices in the Middle East. One may join these statements to the important mediating efforts of Egypt in the Israeli-Palestinian context over the past two years – efforts that began at least one year before the disengagement and are continuing with contacts relating to the release of the kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit.

There is clearly a common interest between Israel and the moderate Arab states with regard to Iran's regional ambitions and the danger of extreme Islamic elements in the Middle East, acting with or without Iran's support. It is important to recognize that in these terms a rare political opportunity has emerged – a narrow window of opportunity that has opened because of the current crisis. Nevertheless, there remains a long list of issues separating Israel and the Arab states, and care must be taken when attempting to build on shared interests in the context of inter-state relations. At the very least, care should be taken not to complicate matters for governments that have adopted potentially unpopular stances by forcing them to choose sides between Israel or the US and what they view as Arab interests.