

U.S. Interests Require a Ceasefire in Lebanon

By Katherine Metres Abbadi

Israel's harsh military response to the capture of three soldiers gives the United States an opportunity to show the world that it stands for peace, security, and freedom for all the people of the Middle East. We can best achieve national security for the United States, Israel, Lebanon, and Palestine by insisting on a ceasefire and comprehensive negotiations based on the international consensus.

Certainly Israel has the right to defend itself. All states and peoples – including the Palestinians and Lebanese – have this right. But Israeli actions in Palestine and Lebanon do not constitute legitimate self-defense.

In Palestine Israel has jailed 23 Palestinian officials and destroyed civilian infrastructure, leaving Gazans without access to water, food, or medical care. This is in addition to killing over 150 Palestinians this summer, most of them civilians.

In Lebanon, Israeli forces have bombed innumerable civilian targets, including a hospital, convoys of refugees, an international airport, power plants, bridges, and whole civilian residential neighborhoods of Beirut. According to James Dobbins, a former Bush administration ambassador, "Many of the targets have no conceivable relationship to Hezbollah." The Israeli assault has forced half a million civilians to flee their homes and killed 900 Lebanese, almost all of them civilians. Hezbollah has responded by attacking Israeli civilians, killing 29.

Israel's actions suggest not self-defense but a plan to terrorize a civilian population to force some party to disarm Hezbollah in order to stop the Israeli killings. The irony is that Israel could have achieved this goal by returning all Lebanese political prisoners and the occupied territory of Shebaa Farms when it withdrew from Lebanon. The current conflict has only strengthened Hezbollah's popularity in Lebanon.

Israel could also set the standard on political prisoners by forswearing its publicly acknowledged policy of capturing and holding Arab civilians for use as "bargaining chips" with militant groups.

Astonishingly, our President is actually resisting calls for a ceasefire. Apparently he believes that the U.S. interest is best served by allowing Israel to kill as many Lebanese as possible. However, by supporting such an aggressive approach, we risk turning many more people toward militancy and terrorism if they see those as the only ways to secure their rights.

The United States has much to gain by replacing unconditional support for Israel's brutal, unwise policies with a policy that promotes security for both Israel and Lebanon and freedom for the Palestinians.

First, a ceasefire in Lebanon and fair resolution of the Palestinian issue would promote US interests in the Middle East generally. If we also ended our Iraq war quickly and responsibly, we

would find ourselves again a partner welcomed not only by Arab governments but also by Arab citizens. This would mean that major Middle Eastern economic markets would open to us, U.S. citizens would be able to enjoy traveling safely to Biblical and historical sites, and our men and women in uniform would be out of harm's way.

Second, peace in the Middle East would boost the Global War on Terror by undercutting a recruiting tool that has been cynically manipulated by the likes of Osama Bin Laden. Fanatics would be less able to recruit or incite by calling the United States the "Great Satan" while showing footage of Arab civilians killed by Israeli forces using American weapons.

Third, it would strongly enhance U.S. legitimacy as a world leader. Decisions supported by the United States in the Security Council would gain new credibility and power. Countries in Europe and the developing world would increasingly appreciate and follow U.S. leadership.

And finally, it would promote American values worldwide. Democracy and human rights would serve as universal standards as the superpower United States became more consistent in its support for those bedrocks of human freedom.

Alternatively, we could continue on the present path. Outraged by human rights atrocities, Arabs and others would be increasingly opposed to Israel and the United States. We would be blamed for transferring our weapons to Israel, which uses them in violation of U.S. law to kill civilians, and for shielding Israel from international accountability. We could therefore expect more trouble in our relations with the Arab world and Muslims.

What's more, blindly following the rash path taken by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is putting Israel in danger. The only way for Israel to achieve security is to negotiate a just peace with the Palestinians and Arab states.

Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora has called for a ceasefire that includes Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Shebaa Farms, the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails, and a return to the terms of the 1949 armistice. These are reasonable requests that are internationally accepted.

As for Palestine, on the day that Israel began its assault on Gaza, Hamas' political wing embraced a two-state solution based on the international consensus. The Arab League and PLO had previously accepted the same proposal, and the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza support it. It is time for the United States to escort Israel back to the peace table.

We are at a crossroads. The United States can stay on a path likely to lead to decades of continued conflict at all of our expense. But it would be far wiser to pursue the most realistic path to enhancing U.S. national security and achieving freedom and peace for all the people of the Middle East.

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