

Hate Thy Neighbor

Understanding the new and lethal logic of violence in the Middle East—and what the world can do to find peace

By LISA BEYER

THE CONFLICT INVOLVING Israel and its neighbors has erupted once more—and no one knows how bad and destabilizing it may get. Israel's ferocious response to Hizballah's kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, which came a little more than two weeks after Palestinian militants from Hamas seized an Israeli corporal and smuggled him into the Gaza Strip, has produced the worst Arab-Israeli cross-border conflict since Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The great bulk of the pain in mid-July was felt in Lebanon, as Israel bombarded the country, including sites in Beirut, killing more than 100 Lebanese, almost all civilians. Hizballah, an Islamist Shi'ite group that operates freely in southern Lebanon, killed eight Israeli soldiers in its initial raid on July 12 and has since flung hundreds of rockets into Israel, killing four civilians.

What's driving the violence, and why does it seem so difficult to tamp down? What we're seeing today is not simply a replay of age-old hatreds between Israel and its Arab enemies. With new governments in place in the three key centers of the crisis—Israel, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority—and fighters within the radical Islamist groups Hamas and Hizballah eager to assert their agendas, the region is going through a period of dramatic and in some ways radical change. The volatility has added new fuel to the motivations and ambitions that have defined why they fight. And that poses a challenge for the international community, including a U.S. Administration already waging two wars in the Islamic world.



■ WHY THE ARABS FIGHT

TO UNDERSTAND WHY THE ARAB militants of Hamas and Hizballah are picking a fight with Israel now, you might start with an election. In January, Hamas, which is sworn to Israel's destruction, won the Palestinian general vote. The Hamas political leader in Gaza, Ismail Haniya, a relative moderate, became Prime Minister, and hammered out an agreement with Palestinian Authority President

Mahmoud Abbas on a platform that would implicitly recognize Israel if it would withdraw to its 1967 borders. Hamas' hard-liners strongly resist recognizing Israel, though, because they believe that God gave all the lands of the Middle East to Muslims and that the Jewish state should be destroyed. On June 25, Hamas militants decided to try a new, daring tactic: they emerged from a tunnel dug under the Gaza fence to kill two Israeli soldiers and nab Corporal Gilad Shalit. Instead of talking about a peace deal, the Palestinian Authority found itself dealing with a rain of Israeli bombardments and border incursions.

Meanwhile, Hizballah, which was created in 1982 to resist Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon, has internal political incentives to act against Israel. In the new Lebanon, genuine independence is trying to take root after popular unrest forced the Syrians to lift their yoke on the country last spring. As a result, whether Hizballah should be allowed to remain armed six years after the Israelis left Lebanon is the most divisive political issue in the country today. Critics argue that only government forces should bear arms. Hizballah counters that given the weakness of



Provoked by the hostage taking, Olmert's government is also trying to settle other scores. Palestinian militants have been regularly firing homemade Qassam rockets, a Hamas specialty, into Israel from Gaza. Hizballah has occasionally also lobbed rockets across the border since the Israeli pullout. And Israel has watched in dismay as Hizballah has built border fortifications, sometimes 30 feet from Israeli outposts and stockpiled with what Israel estimates to be 13,000 rockets.

So where might this lead? Is anything remotely approaching quiet, if not quite peace, possible in a place where all the actors see gain in continuing to fight?

As bleak as it now looks, it's not entirely out of the question. The chances are greater in Lebanon, where there are actors with a clear interest in taming Hizballah. As in past flare-ups on the border, coming to terms will almost surely require a third-party mediator.

Dealing with Hamas won't be as easy. In Gaza, the main force that has tended to moderate the behavior of the militants has been public opinion, which has sometimes swung against the radicals when their actions prompted Israeli reprisals that punished the population. Now, though, Gazans place the blame for scores of deaths and deteriorating conditions squarely on Israel.

What should the U.S. do? British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other allies would like Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to take a more active role in bringing first calm and then a return to peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians. At this point, though, U.S. intervention can't undo the reasons Israel and its enemies fight. But doing nothing is an even bigger risk. ■

Questions

1. What internal political incentives does Hizballah have to act against Israel now?
2. What is the primary factor that has moderated the behavior of members of Hamas?

the Lebanese Army, a disciplined guerrilla force is needed to deter Israeli aggression.

But Hizballah and Hamas in this case have a more practical payoff in mind. Israeli governments have proved willing to make big concessions to get back one or two or three of their own captives, even dead ones. With 9,000 detainees in Israeli jails, the Palestinians now have a tremendous interest in prisoner swaps. Hizballah too hopes to profit from aggression. Israel holds only three Lebanese prisoners, but the group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, grandly noted that he also was making the release of Palestinian detainees a condition for freeing his Israeli captives, which would bring him and his group glory.

■ WHY ISRAEL FIGHTS

THE ISRAELIS ARE DETERMINED TO SHOW THEIR adversaries that they aren't intimidated. That has become clear in Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's announcements that Israel will not negotiate for the return of its soldiers. Israeli officials have long talked of "changing the rules of the game," and Olmert unleashed the military to do just that, setting the price for aggression against Israel so high that its enemies would be deterred from acting up in the future.