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# The Volatile Middle East

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# The Volatile Middle East

By Frank Jenista, Ph.D.

Important events have changed the Middle East over the past year — the victory of the radical party Hamas in Palestinian elections, a month of open warfare between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, determined pursuit of nuclear technology by Iran, and continuing conflict in Iraq. The consequences are potentially enormous, and future directions are unclear. Let's take a brief look at the major players and what may be ahead.

## Israel

Last year, then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon took the dramatic step of removing Israeli troops and settlements from Gaza, handing control over to the Palestinian Authority as part of a “land for peace” strategy intended to create two states, Palestine and Israel, living side by side in peace and security.

Despite this major Israeli initiative, rockets continued to be fired into Israel from Gaza, and radicals tunneled under the border to kidnap an Israeli soldier, resulting in Israeli attacks on radical leaders, the arrest of Hamas party members, and the breakdown of any progress toward a two-state solution.



In 2000, as part of an earlier “land for peace” effort, Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon under terms of a United Nations (UN) agreement which called for the disarmament of all Lebanese militias and deployment of the Lebanese army on the Israeli border. All Lebanese factions disarmed except Hezbollah. Beyond that, Hezbollah forces took control of southern Lebanon and prevented the Lebanese army from moving to the Israeli border.

This summer, Hezbollah militants crossed the Israeli/Lebanon border, ambushed an Israeli patrol, killed six, and took two soldiers hostage. A month of intense fighting between Israel and Hezbollah followed, resulting in thousands of Hezbollah rockets fired into northern Israel, Israeli air strikes and ground attacks in Lebanon, and hundreds of Israeli and thousands of Lebanese casualties.

These two events, in Gaza and Lebanon, have fundamentally redefined Israeli attitudes. Both of Israel’s “land for peace” ventures resulted in “land for war,” discrediting Israeli factions which favored a negotiated peace. The Palestinians are now led by Hamas, a party which will neither recognize nor talk with Israel. Hezbollah, like Hamas, is dedicated to the eradication of the “Zionist entity” from what it sees as occupied Palestinian land.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert ended up in political trouble because his “land for peace” strategy failed and because Israeli forces did not deliver a knockout blow to Hezbollah. Because Hezbollah survived a month of combat against Israel,

LEFT: SUPERSTOCK

## Timeline

**622** The Hijra: the prophet Mohammad flees from Mecca to Medina.

**1095-1291** Christian Crusaders from Europe come to the Middle East to fight the spread of Islam.

**1517-1918** The Ottoman Empire extends over most of the Arab world.

**1897** The Zionist Organization is founded by Theodor Herzl in Switzerland with the goal of working towards the establishment of a secure home for Jews in Palestine.

**1922** The League of Nations issues a mandate to Britain to establish a national home for Jews in Palestine.

**1932** Iraq is recognized as an independent monarchy.

**1944** France grants Lebanon full independence.

**1945** Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Transjordan, and northern Yemen form the Arab League, which opposes the establishment of a Jewish nation.

**1946** Syria gains independence from France.

**1948** The State of Israel is established.

**1967** The Six-Day War is fought between Israel and the Arab states.

**1972** Israeli athletes are taken hostage at the Olympic Games in Munich.

**1975** Civil war breaks out in Lebanon between the Christian majority and the growing Muslim population.

**1977** Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat becomes the first Arab leader to visit Israel and signs the Camp David agreement, making peace with Israel.

**1979** Ninety people, including 63 Americans, are taken hostage in the American Embassy in Tehran by Iranian students.

**1982** Israel invades Lebanon, forcing the PLO to leave the country.

**1988** A Palestine National Council proclaims the State of Palestine.



*continued on page 11*

the Israeli military's aura of invincibility has been significantly damaged, perhaps encouraging others to confront Israel in the future.

### *The Bottom Line*

"Land for peace" is dead. "No compromise" hard-liners are in the ascendancy, supported by a strong majority of Israeli opinion. Israeli settlements are not likely to be removed from the West Bank, as previously anticipated. A security fence will soon surround all Palestinian areas. Peace negotiations with Palestinians are unlikely for the foreseeable future.

## **Palestinians**



The return of Gaza to Palestinian control was an opportunity for the Palestinian Authority to demonstrate its capacity to govern. Just a year ago, many hoped that Palestinian success in Gaza would lead to negotiations on the West Bank and continued movement toward the two-state solution envisioned by the international community.



SAMUEL ARANDA / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

Instead, radicals continued to attack Israel from within Gaza, and the Palestinians elected as their leaders the Hamas party, which refuses to recognize Israel or any previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements. As a result, the West has withheld hundreds of millions of dollars in annual financial support to the Palestinian Authority — which is now broke. Salaries have not been paid for months, and unemployment is at more than 50 percent. Rocket attacks, attempted suicide bombings, and the kidnapping of soldiers resulted in Israeli attacks

on radicals and their Gaza infrastructure. Much of the Hamas leadership was arrested and, within Gaza, firefights have broken out among competing Palestinian factions.

### *The Bottom Line*

The past year has been a complete disaster for Palestinians. In addition to all the crises listed above (most of them self-inflicted), any opportunity for Palestinians to achieve an independent state has vanished from the horizon.

## **Lebanon**



Hezbollah (literally the "Party of God") was created among Lebanese Shiites in the early 1980s by the revolutionary Shiite regime in Iran. (Shiites make up about one-third of the Lebanese population.) Hezbollah preaches the eradication of Israel and is supported by Iran to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars per year. Those dollars (and numerous social programs) buy a lot of allegiance among the poor Lebanese Shiite community, while Iranian weapons and training have produced a formidable guerrilla army — as the Israelis discovered. Over the years, Hezbollah carved out for itself a "state within a state," occupying the Israeli border, much of southern Lebanon, and the southern suburbs of Beirut. In those areas, Hezbollah, not the Lebanese government, is the authority.

Hezbollah put up stronger resistance to Israel than any previous Arab force, winning itself great popularity in the Muslim world. Photos of the charismatic Hezbollah leader Nasrallah now adorn walls and T-shirts across the Middle East. Iranian President Ahmedinejad led demonstrations celebrating Hezbollah's "great victory over Israel."

Once the fighting stopped, however, problems quickly surfaced. Israeli forces killed 500 to 700 of Hezbollah's 3,000 fighters and destroyed much of southern Beirut as well as Shiite villages/Hezbollah strong points in southern Lebanon. (Iran quickly provided hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars for Hezbollah to hand out to its followers, to try to ensure their continuing loyalty.)

Beyond that, the terms of the UN agreement to end the fighting are problematic for Hezbollah and its anti-Israeli agenda. The Lebanese army and a strongly reinforced UN force is taking control of the Israeli border and southern Lebanon, complicating and perhaps preventing Hezbollah efforts to confront Israel directly. The UN resolution also calls (for the third time) for the disarming of Hezbollah and for an embargo against the entry of any weapons except those for the Lebanese government.

As diplomats know, the devil is in the details, but if the terms of the UN agreement are carried out in coming months (and this *is* a big if), Hezbollah's current status as an independent, armed actor within Lebanon could be significantly eroded.

Further, by kidnapping Israeli soldiers, Hezbollah plunged Lebanon into war and economic disaster without the consultation or approval of either the Lebanese people or the Lebanese government. Since the end of hostilities, Nasrallah publicly admitted that he did not think Israel would react so strongly to his attack on their forces — but this “oops” apology does not comfort most Lebanese.

### ***The Bottom Line***

Despite basking in short-term adulation within the Muslim/Arab world, Hezbollah is under significant pressure. Most Sunni Arab states (such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia) are not happy that their traditional Persian (Iranian) Shiite enemies have created this armed puppet within an Arab state. The Sunni Arabs are already actively supporting both Lebanese and UN efforts to erode Hezbollah's influence. Within Lebanon, the Christian/Sunni/Druze majority will also be delighted to undermine Hezbollah. It is conceivable, therefore, that the net result of the Israeli/Hezbollah conflict will be a substantially weakened Hezbollah and much improved Israeli security on its northern border.

### **Iraq**

In recent months, the plans of al-Qaida in Iraq to provoke sectarian conflict between the majority Shiites (60 percent) and minority Sunnis (20 percent), have borne unfortunate fruit. The destruction by al-Qaida (which is Sunni) of one of the Shiites' most important shrines provoked the desired retaliation by Shiites against Sunnis. Since then many Iraqis have been killed simply because they were from the wrong Islamic sect.

## **Timeline (continued)**

**1989** Osama bin Laden develops the al-Qaida network.

**1990** Iraq invades Kuwait.

**1991** The 25-year Civil War in Lebanon ends.

**1991** A U.S.-led military coalition removes Iraqi forces from Kuwait.



**1994** Jordan signs a peace treaty with Israel.

**1995** The U.S. imposes oil and trade sanctions against Iran.

**1995** Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is assassinated.

**1996** Islamic fundamentalist Osama bin Laden is welcomed by the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan.

**1999** The Israelis and Palestinians sign a revised deal aimed at reviving the Middle East peace process.

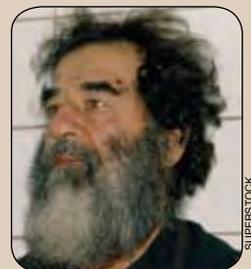
**2000** Israel withdraws troops from South Lebanon.

**2001** Terrorists loyal to Osama bin Laden attack the U.S. World Trade Center and the Pentagon.



**2001** U.S. troops invade Afghanistan, and the Taliban flees.

**2003** U.S. troops invade Iraq; Saddam Hussein is captured later in the year.



**2005** Israeli forces and settlers depart, leaving Gaza in Palestinian control.

**2006** The radical group Hamas wins the Palestinian elections.



**2006** Palestinians from Gaza kidnap an Israeli soldier. Hezbollah crosses the border to ambush an Israeli patrol and kidnap two soldiers. Israel retaliates against both.

Adapted from the WGBH Education Foundation timeline at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/timeline/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/timeline/index.html)



**Left:** Militias have increased their influence in Iraq, and sectarian violence has spread throughout much of the region. The possibility of civil war between Sunni and Shiite has been close to erupting.

**Below:** Coalition forces track down insurgents that have been launching attacks against the elected government of Iraq.



Iraqi and coalition forces have focused their efforts against the death squads and the armed militias carrying out these atrocities. The elected Iraqi government recognizes that, unless controlled, these sectarian revenge killings could result in the civil war hoped for by al-Qaida.

The key to a stable Iraq is gradual expansion of the new government's ability to provide security and effective governance, working with the U.S. and other international allies. The threats to Iraq's future come not only from al-Qaida terrorists and Sunni militants, but from within the Shiite majority itself. Shiite Iran would very much like to have an important influence within Iraq and has funded and encouraged the formation of militias like the Mahdi Army of radical Shiite Muqtada al-Sadr. Al-Sadr is trying to create a Hezbollah-like state within Iraq, permitting him to participate politically in the new democracy of Iraq while simultaneously maintaining an armed force which can trump government control within al-Sadr's home areas.

History is important: After World War II, with no insurgency underway, it took four years for Germany to have a democratic constitution and elected government. MacArthur needed seven years to create a Japanese democracy. In three and a half years, despite ferocious resistance and suicide bombers, the Iraqis have written a constitution

and elected a government. They deserve patient and determined support while they work toward a successful, stable democracy.

### *The Bottom Line*

It is essential that the democratic forces in Iraq win. Permitting Shiite radicals or al-Qaida terrorists to gain control of Iraq and its oil resources would be a disaster for U.S. interests and destroy hopes of any moderate future in the Middle East. A precipitate U.S. departure from Iraq would produce just such a result.

### **Iran**

Iran is ruled by a radical theocracy dedicated to leadership of the Muslim world, hegemony in the Middle East, and the destruction of Israel and the United States. (President Ahmedinejad recently led thousands in public chants of "Death to America.") Iran is spending tens of billions of dollars on armaments and the determined pursuit of nuclear

weapons. It already has the biggest missile inventory in the entire Middle East, along with large numbers of chemical and biological weapons.

President Ahmedinejad is a follower of one of the most apocalyptic Islamic sects. He believes that the 12<sup>th</sup> (or Hidden) Imam, the Mahdi, will return at a time of total chaos to bring peace (and Islam) to the world. Worse, his sect appears to believe that the Mahdi's return can be accelerated by creating the apocalyptic situation necessary for him to appear.

### *The Bottom Line*

Iran has radical ambitions and billions of dollars in oil wealth to support them. It is the number-one state supporter of terrorism and accepts none of the accepted rules of warfare. Internally, it refers to its anticipated nuclear weapon as the "Islamic bomb." In short, the Iranian regime has both the money and the motivation to confront the world and demonstrates no hesitation about creating (or, indeed, incurring) mass casualties. Iran is by far the greatest danger to the Middle East — and the world — today.

An ancient curse says, "May you live in interesting times." Welcome to interesting times. **T**

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—Howard Hendricks

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