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The four big myths behind the Lebanon crisis

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Like any good negotiator, Condoleezza Rice, US secretary of state, has set expectations low for her current diplomatic mission. She warned that diplomacy over the conflict in Lebanon would be difficult and there would be "no quick fixes". And rightly so; the situation will, in fact, remain hopeless unless three key myths are addressed.

The first myth is that Israel has not fully withdrawn from Lebanon. Hizbollah, backed by Syria and Lebanon, continues to justify its terrorism by claiming that Israel continues to occupy a small area called the Shebaa Farms. That is a myth. The facts are that all international records clearly prove that the region is, in fact, part of Syria, not Lebanon. When it was clear in 2000 that the Israelis were going to withdraw fully from Lebanon, Syrian and Lebanese officials fabricated the fiction that this small sparsely populated area was part of Lebanon.

At the time, I was representing the US in the United Nations Security Council negotiations over the issue and saw first hand a crudely altered map the Syrians and Lebanese tried to use to back up their dubious claim. As a visit to the UN map room clearly showed, all internationally recognised maps show the Shebaa Farms clearly inside Syria. It is time Syria and Lebanon gave up this flimsy excuse for their continued attacks.

Myth two is that the Arabs can remain disengaged from the search for progress. We will never know whether, if Saudi Arabia and Egypt had pressed Yassir Arafat as leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation to accept the two-state solution offered to him in 2001, there would be peace today between the Israelis and Palestinians. But it is clear that no progress will be made now with Hamas in government and Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas, struggling to overcome his failed legacy. The US and Europeans cannot alone press the Palestinians for progress. The Arabs must join in that effort. Comprehensive negotiations are not likely but small confidence building measures are - if the Arabs begin to engage responsibly.

Lebanon presents an even tougher challenge for the Arabs. It is encouraging to see Saudi Arabia and Egypt condemning the Hizbollah attacks. This constructive attitude most likely has more to do with concerns among these Sunni Arab leaders over prospects of a Shia crescent spreading across the region in the wake of the war in Iraq than with a concern for the lack of a peace process with Israel. This fear is exacerbated by the possibility that Lebanon and Syria could fall to violent fundamentalists.

If anything, the current chaos in the region should be a wake-up call to the Sunni Arab leaders that they can no longer afford to sit on the sidelines. Ms Rice may be banking on an "umbrella" of Arab leaders willing to line up against Iran. More likely, at best they will take small steps to quell the current situation, such as pressing the Palestinians in Gaza, as well as Syria and Iran, to act responsibly in the current crises. In this context, that would be considered a success.

Myth three is that an international peacekeeping force will solve the crisis. Listening to the current debate, one would be hard-pressed to know that there has been a peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon for almost three decades, up to recently numbering nearly 2,000 troops. It is the UN's most deadly mission, with nearly 260 soldiers killed since 1978. No peacekeeping force, not even a Nato force, will take over the task from Israel of forcibly disarming Hizbollah. Rather, such a force needs to go in after there is a political agreement to remove Hizbollah from southern Lebanon and disarm the militia, and for the Lebanese armed forces to deploy south as UN resolutions have required them to do since the Israelis withdrew in 2000. These steps would ensure there is no return to the status quo ante, the main precondition for Israel, backed by the US, to agreeing to a ceasefire.

The current crisis has already vanquished a fourth myth - that the US can sit on the sidelines in the Israeli-Arab conflict. Certainly, no comprehensive peace agreement has been possible in President George W. Bush's five years in office. But the lack of any progress has left a vacuum that the extremists are only too happy to fill. The US needs to drive a process, even an incremental one, that demonstrates the potential for progress. Entering the game late, the US has less leverage than it could have had; but even now, it could make progress. Ms Rice, and eventually President Bush, must press a two-track strategy, with constructive Arab engagement at the centre. First and foremost, Washington must make it clear to the Arab and Iranian leadership that support for Hizbollah's attacks and the organisation's continued military presence in Lebanon must end. A broader agreement and a lasting ceasefire will follow only after agreement on that key point. Second, Ms Rice must convince the Arabs, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to press the Palestinian leadership to act responsibly. The search for a comprehensive Palestinian-Arab peace is unfortunately now only a long-term goal as it will take time for Hamas to reform or be voted out of office.

In the meantime, the US, Israel and the Arab leaders must press for progress, albeit only small, uphill steps that would at least keep the region from collapsing again. Vanquishing the myths that help perpetuate the conflict will be key.

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