

## Delicate balancing act needed to avoid sparking all-out war in the Middle East

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WHEN DAVID PETRAEUS pitched up in Lebanon last week for talks with the country's president, Michel Suleiman, the trip was billed as a friendly face-to-face chat between Washington's top general and a leading US ally. On one level it was: Petraeus takes over the reins at US Central Command next month and as his bailiwick includes Lebanon it made sense to pop into Beirut to say howdy to the neighbours. But this is the Middle East and no sooner had the four-star general landed than the conspiracy theories started circulating.

When it became clear that Petraeus had also held meetings with the prime minister, Fouad Siniora, and the defence minister, Elias Murr, the tittle-tattle went into overdrive. The official line was that the discussions were limited to the defence of Lebanon - the US is a major donor of military assistance, having supplied \$270 million last year - but the timing of the talks seemed awkward, to say the least. Although Lebanon is at present in Washington's orbit, Hezbollah forms part of its government and a few days ago Siniora conceded that his coalition partners have "the right to take action to liberate lands that have remained occupied at the Shaba Farms, the hills of Shuba village and the northern portion of the village of Ghajar, with all legitimate means possible, and to resist Israeli aggression".

This could be written off as the kind of rhetoric which passes for political debate in this neck of the woods, but in this case it was said in deadly earnest. Two years ago, when the South Lebanon border war reached stalemate and the United Nations passed Resolution 1701 which set limitations on military action and introduced a peacekeeping force, Hezbollah refused to accept that it had been defeated. In their minds they had gained a moral victory over the Israelis. Last month's exchange of prisoners seemed to underline that sense of superiority.

More importantly, and infinitely more dangerously, the Shia militant organisation has used the intervening period to re-arm its militias along the border. Despite the UN presence, Hezbollah has been able to add to its arsenal and to bring in missiles which have a significantly longer range than the old Soviet-produced Katyusha rockets. The Israeli Defence Forces have a vested interest in knowing what goes on along the border and their intelligence services claim that Hezbollah now has a stockpile of up to 30,000 missiles and that these include the Zelzal, a mobile tactical weapon capable of hitting targets as far away as Tel Aviv.

If that is the case - and Hezbollah's military commander Sheikh Nabil Kaouk recently boasted to western journalists that his forces were ready and equipped to deal with any military eventuality - then the southern border has once more become a tinderbox awaiting the spark.

For the US that is both a challenge and an opportunity. It's no secret that these weapons were supplied by Iran or Syria or both and Hezbollah's links to Tehran are well enough advertised to need no further elaboration. As a canny soldier, Petraeus will also know that any Israeli strike against Iran will invite Hezbollah retaliation and that if that happens, a regional war could quite easily break out in the Middle East.

That scenario presents Petraeus with a delicate balancing act. He needs to support Israel as it is the oldest and most loyal of Washington's allies, yet he also has to keep Lebanon sweet even though its government includes in its coalition a grouping which the US has outlawed as a terrorist organisation with close links to Iran. In normal times the US has deep enough pockets and sharp enough elbows to prevent hostilities breaking out along the south Lebanon border, but just now the times are out of joint.

Israel is mired in a leadership crisis which means that the talks with Syria are as good as stalled. Iran shows no signs of offering any compliance over its development of nuclear technology and the Lebanese government has signed up to a deal which gives a coalition partner the right to wage war against its southern neighbour. On the same day that Petraeus was in Lebanon glad-handing the locals, Israel's transportation minister and leadership hopeful Shaul Mofaz was in Washington where he told everyone within hearing range that "Hezbollah is taking over the government in Beirut and gradually taking over the organs of power".

He's probably right and that will explain why Israel is strengthening its military presence along the border and has moved Patriot anti-missile batteries to ring-fence Tel Aviv. After what happened two years ago it doesn't want to be caught out twice. As the next commander of US Central Command, Petraeus's presence in the region might have been re-assuring, but Israel knows better than most countries that it's preferable to be safe than sorry.

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