

Winds of War

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Several conflicts of various intensities are raging in the Middle East. But a bigger war, involving more states -- Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, the Palestinian Authority and perhaps the United States and others -- is growing more likely every day, beckoned by the sense that America and Israel are in retreat and that radical Islam is ascending.

Consider the pell-mell events of recent weeks. Iran imprisons four Americans on absurd charges only weeks after seizing 15 British sailors on the high seas. Iran's Revolutionary Guard is caught delivering weapons to the Taliban and explosives to Iraqi terrorists. A car bomb in Lebanon is used to assassinate parliament member Walid Eido, killing nine others and wounding 11 more.

At the same time, Fatah al-Islam, a shady group linked to Syria, launches an attack on the Lebanese army from within a Palestinian refugee area, beheading several soldiers. Tehran trumpets further progress on nuclear enrichment as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad repeats his call for annihilating Israel, crowing that "the countdown to the destruction of this regime has begun." Hamas seizes control militarily in Gaza. Katyusha rockets are launched from Lebanon into northern Israel for the first time since the end of last summer's Israel-Hezbollah war.

Two important inferences can be distilled from this list. One is that the Tehran regime takes its slogan, "death to America," quite seriously, even if we do not. It is arming the Taliban, with which it was at sword's point when the Taliban were in power. It seems to be supplying explosives not only to Shiite, but also Sunni terrorists in Iraq. It reportedly is sheltering high-level al Qaeda figures despite the Sunni-Shiite divide. All of these surprising actions are for the sake of bleeding the U.S. However hateful this behavior may be to us, it has a certain strategic logic: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

What is even more worrisome about the events enumerated above is that most of them are devoid of any such strategic logic. For example, the Hamas "putsch" in Gaza -- as Marwan Barghouti, the hero of the Palestinian intifada, labeled it from his prison cell -- was an enormous blunder.

Hamas already mostly controlled Gaza. It is hard to imagine what gains it can reap from its "victory." But it is easy to see the losses. Fatah, and the government of its leader Mahmoud Abbas, will be able to restore their strength in the West Bank with the eager assistance of virtually the whole outside world, while Gaza will be shut off and denied outside aid far more strictly than during the past year. Israel will retaliate against shelling with a freer hand. Egypt will tighten its border. And Hamas has in one swoop negated its own supreme achievement, namely winning a majority in Palestine's 2006 parliamentary elections. Until now, Hamas had a powerful argument: how can the West demand democracy and then boycott the winners? But now it is Hamas itself that has destroyed Palestinian democracy by staging an armed coup. Its democratic credentials have gone up in the smoke of its own arson.

Syria's actions in Lebanon scarcely make more sense. The murder of parliamentarian Eido will solidify and energize the majority that opposes Syria. Some suppose that, having now bumped off two Lebanese MPs (Pierre Gemayel was the other one), Syria plans to shave away the anti-Syrian majority in Lebanon's parliament by committing another five murders. But if so, this is a crazy gambit. Such a campaign would invite international intervention. It might well fracture the pro-Syrian forces: More Shiites will abandon Hezbollah and more Maronites will turn against Hezbollah's cat's-paw, Michel Aoun. And the murders might be for naught anyway: By-elections are already being planned that are likely to replace the martyred legislators with others of the same mind. As for the attack on the Lebanese army, Fatah al-Islam is on the brink of being crushed, leaving behind only more hatred of Syria and a better-armed, more confident Lebanese army.

As for Iran's actions, while arming the Taliban and Iraqi terrorists may make sense, what is the point of seizing British sailors or locking up the four Iranian-Americans, including the beloved 67-year-old scholar, Haleh Esfandieri, none of whom are involved even in political activity, much less in the exercise of hard power?

The apparent meaning of all of this pointless provocation and bullying is that the axis of radicals -- Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah -- is feeling its oats. In part its aim is to intimidate the rest of us, in part it is merely enjoying flexing its

muscles. It believes that its side has defeated America in Iraq, and Israel in Gaza and Lebanon. Mr. Ahmadinejad recently claimed that the West has already begun to "surrender," and he gloated that "final victory . . . is near." It is this bravado that bodes war.

A large portion of modern wars erupted because aggressive tyrannies believed that their democratic opponents were soft and weak. Often democracies have fed such beliefs by their own flaccid behavior. Hitler's contempt for America, stoked by the policy of appeasement, is a familiar story. But there are many others. North Korea invaded South Korea after Secretary of State Dean Acheson declared that Korea lay beyond our "defense perimeter." Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait after our ambassador assured him that America does not intervene in quarrels among Arabs. Imperial Germany launched World War I, encouraged by Great Britain's open reluctance to get involved. Nasser brought on the 1967 Six Day War, thinking that he could extort some concessions from Israel by rattling his sword.

Democracies, it is now well established, do not go to war with each other. But they often get into wars with non-democracies. Overwhelmingly the non-democracy starts the war; nonetheless, in the vast majority of cases, it is the democratic side that wins. In other words, dictators consistently underestimate the strength of democracies, and democracies provoke war through their love of peace, which the dictators mistake for weakness.

Today, this same dynamic is creating a moment of great danger. The radicals are becoming reckless, asserting themselves for little reason beyond the conviction that they can. They are very likely to overreach. It is not hard to imagine scenarios in which a single match -- say a terrible terror attack from Gaza -- could ignite a chain reaction. Israel could handle Hamas, Hezbollah and Syria, albeit with painful losses all around, but if Iran intervened rather than see its regional assets eliminated, could the U.S. stay out?

With the Bush administration's policies having failed to pacify Iraq, it is natural that the public has lost patience and that the opposition party is hurling brickbats. But the demands of congressional Democrats that we throw in the towel in Iraq, their attempts to constrain the president's freedom to destroy Iran's nuclear weapons program, the proposal of the Baker-Hamilton commission that we appeal to Iran to help extricate us from Iraq -- all of these may be read by the radicals as signs of our imminent collapse. In the name of peace, they are hastening the advent of the next war.

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