

What Can Pakistan Do to Stop Israel and Hezbollah?

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When it comes to remedying crises in the Middle East, whether it is Israeli occupation or suicide bombings in Jerusalem, Pakistan is thought to hold little or no political, economic or military clout. It is understood by Arabs and the Western world that Pakistan is not part of the Middle East, not a member of the Arab League and, above all, cannot be a helpful broker abroad while fighting terrorists in its northern province and nationalist insurgents in Baluchistan.

Pakistan, however, is the only Muslim nuclear power, with the world's eighth largest military comprised of more than half a million active soldiers, and shares its western border with Iran. Pakistan can deploy a stabilization force in Lebanon within days. Building on the recent diplomatic connections with Israel, the likelihood of the Iranian gas pipeline project, and close US-Pak relations, Pakistan has a unique opportunity to persuade Hezbollah and Israel to sign a ceasefire. The United States, Europe, Arab nations, and the United Nations have greater influence as well as vested interests in stopping further escalation of the present crisis into Palestine, Lebanon and possibly Syria and Iran, but Pakistan is the ideal peace catalyst. It has never participated in any of the Israeli-Arab wars or funded families of suicide bombers in Lebanon or Palestine. Now is the time for a stabilization force from a nuclear non-Arab Muslim power to exert diplomatic influence and provide military leadership by brokering a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah.

Israel and Hezbollah share a mutual fixation on complete and merciless annihilation. This odium goes beyond the kidnapped Israeli soldiers or thousands of Hezbollah prisoners. It is a problem of double consciousness: Israeli foreign policy is divided by liberal concessions towards a two-state solution resulting in mutual coexistence with Palestine and the Arab World, and hawkish notions of one Israel with a Puerto Rican Palestine. Hezbollah is divided into a military wing dedicated to the destruction of Israel and a social wing dedicated to construction of schools and hospitals in Lebanon. While Hezbollahians misfire substandard short-range Iranian and Syrian supplied rockets with the hope of killing Israeli soldiers and civilians Israelis launch American supplied precision missiles to destroy Hezbollah and, undeniably, kill hundreds in collateral damage. Because of all of this and much more for many years the Middle Eastern peace process lies dead like the Dead Sea.

Pakistan can make things better. First and foremost both sides must sign a momentary ceasefire. This should be followed by a 20,000 to 30,000-strong Pakistani UN supported stabilizing force to Lebanon for maintaining peace and supporting reconstruction efforts. Jordan and Egypt, active and influential members of the Arab League, must also provide

troops under a UN mandate, and other affluent Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia should share the bill. These countries must work hard to persuade the United States not to veto another UN ceasefire resolution, and, they must market the value of peace and the dreadful picture of full blown regional war.

The exact nature of Israeli-Hezbollah compromise is the responsibility of these two parties; Pakistan, however, along with other members of the international community can act as peace catalysts by ensuring security and short-term stability in Lebanon. Hezbollah must disband its military wing and South Lebanon must come under full Lebanese constitutional control. Consequently, Israel must respect international borders, recognize the reformed Hezbollah as a political party, and sign a peace treaty with Lebanon.

This is more easily said than done. To begin with, Pakistan's army seems to be doubly overstretched in the war on terror and a homegrown nationalist insurgency, not to mention the recent cancellation of peace talks with India after the gruesome terrorist attacks in Mumbai, which may again end up in a massive border troop deployment reminiscent of the aftermath of New Delhi terrorist attacks of December 2001. But with an active force of more than half a million soldiers, 30,000 troops supported by the UN and the Arab League can be sent without upsetting national commitments.

Unlike the European Union, the Arab League lacks the cohesion and consistency, not to mention the monetary support, needed for such a commitment. The realists would say – it all comes down to the usual solution – Lebanon must take billions of US dollars in aid like Egypt and Jordan in exchange for disbanding Hezbollah, distancing itself from Syria and Iran, and embracing Israel as a de facto reality. Or, for once the Muslim world can stand up as a unified economic and military unit by engaging Israel in a peace process backed by the United Nations and supported by Pakistani military leadership. This would set precedent for the Israeli-Palestine conflict and stop the potential, colossal damage of a full-scale war with Syria and possibly Iran. Pakistan's military engagement to push for a ceasefire would provide security for Syria, and postpone any Iranian or American intervention. If this engagement is successful then Pakistan will enter a new era of regional leadership of a Middle East heading towards economic prosperity. On the other hand, if this crisis erupts and Iran steps in to support Syria, United States will have to move its over-stretched and barely sufficient military resources from Iraq. That will put the nail in the coffin of any real chance for a prosperous and stable Iraq. All major players including Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, Iran, Syria and United States would benefit from a Pakistani stabilization force.

To avoid a full-scale regional confrontation involving Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, and possibly Iran, Pakistan, as the only Muslim nuclear power must intervene now as a peace catalyst to push for a ceasefire under the auspices of the United Nations. The stabilization force recently advocated by UN's Kofi Annan and UK's Tony Blair is a good start. However, Pakistan's government and the world community must act quickly and intelligently to make the stabilization force a reality.

This force must stop the increasingly disproportionate number of civilian casualties in

Lebanon, and aid more than half a million trapped Lebanese refugees. The recent delaying of US Secretary of State's visit to the war-torn region is a sign of US reluctance to push for a ceasefire but this should not deter the rest of the international community. It is time for Pakistan to assert itself as an independent Muslim military power set on contributing to peace and stability in the world.