

**Comments on the Conflicts in the Middle East**  
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Wrong, and more wrong. How to make it right?

The recent attacks on Israel by Hezbollah and Hamas were very wrong, that is not in dispute. Israel had and has a right to defend itself, that also is not in dispute. But the crisis is escalating, more people are being killed, many of them innocent, and more infrastructure that is critical to stable economic activity is being destroyed.

There is real danger in opining on the events of the last week or so as if they were brand new incidents. The actions of Hamas and Hezbollah were contrary to international law and past agreements---they justified a response. On the other hand, Israel's retaliatory actions can be considered disproportionate force, under international law. But where does that leave us? Recent events cannot be discussed in isolation from history, and the critical recognition that all have legitimate grievances. It also cannot be discussed without understanding the significant, and frankly very disturbing role that Iran and Syria are playing here. The history of conflict in the Middle East is very long, and very complex, and these events must be considered in that context.

There are, however, two fundamental premises that are key: Israel clearly has a right to exist as a nation state, without attack; and for Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran and anyone else to deny this, and even worse to vow to eradicate Israel, is frightening for any Israeli, and rightfully condemned by the world at large. On the other hand, although Palestinians are not the only ones involved here, the lack of their own state, and denial of their right to one, has been a major problem in the whole area. The Palestinians have a right to their own nation state, also without attack, and the sooner this is recognized and managed, the better. Unfortunately for all, however, denying the one is not going to assist in obtaining the other.

But of the recent events? Stephen Harper has called Israel's response "measured". I do not agree. (Interesting, even his new friend George Bush is moving toward encouraging "greater restraint".) No one denies Israel's right, and indeed its obligation in this case, to respond—and in some way to warn Iran and Syria that Israel will not be threatened lightly, and will not be messed with. But the current Israeli response does not seem particularly "measured"—worse, it is punishing so many of the wrong people. It may also, ironically, make a future peace harder to achieve. Not only are civilian lives being lost; the destruction of much key infrastructure in Gaza and now in Lebanon, will jeopardize the respective economies and the wherewithal of the affected local populations even further. We, including Israel, must all step back and ask, ***will this level of response really further the concept of peace in the Middle East?***

There are moderates throughout the countries surrounding Israel who are not religious extremists; who are themselves concerned at the rise of religious extremism and the intolerance that it breeds; who do not support terrorist activity; and who wish to work

toward peace in the Middle East. There are many Lebanese who want Syria out of Lebanese affairs, who want to respect the borders, and who not only acknowledge Israel's right to exist but wish to coexist peacefully. In 2005 over a million Lebanese marched in the streets to protest the murder of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and, successfully, to demand an end to Syria's military presence in Lebanon. It is these same people who need to be persuaded to demand the disarmament of Hezbollah---but it is their hearts and minds that are required. It is these many moderates that Israel, and the rest of the world, should be encouraging and supporting, not just by words but by actions---including helping with needed resources, and showing compromises which the more moderate factions can point to as negotiated successes. Imagine that the same money, time, effort and pain that have gone into the recent bombing and other retaliatory efforts had instead been expended in preventative, democracy-building, peace-encouraging efforts?

Is it too late? Is this approach too idealistic? Too naïve? Stephen Harper said yesterday that, "Ongoing escalation is inevitable once conflict begins." I know in my heart that he is wrong. No question, recent events make it much harder. The severity of Israel's response and the damage caused, both physically and emotionally, will almost certainly harden anti-Israeli sentiment. Ironically, it may encourage greater support for Hezbollah. But particularly with Iran and Syria's involvement, allowing ongoing escalation could mean disaster. We cannot, we *must* not lose hope that goodwill, together with the necessary resources, and the necessary ability to compromise, can prevent things getting worse.

There have now been calls for an international peacekeeping force. Until the parties can agree on a desire for peace, and a peace process, then the effectiveness of a peace-keeping force may be limited. (Witness the fact that there already is one there.) A renewed peace process must be embarked on, and a minimum measure of will established. Is there a role for the international community to be involved, to help such a renewed peace process? Absolutely, and I support the United Nations' and Kofi Annan's efforts in this regard. Can Canada participate in this? Yes, and our historical tradition of relative neutrality, one that recognizes the complexity of the issues, and that all sides have grievances, is so important in being effective and respected on the international stage. That reputation, however, was seriously damaged yesterday by Stephen Harper.