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NEWS ANALYSIS

Sign That Crisis Is Regional, Not Just Israel vs. Palestinians

By **STEVEN ERLANGER**

GAZA, July 12 — The expansion of the Gaza crisis into southern [Lebanon](#), confronting [Israel](#) with a conflict on its northern and southern borders, has demonstrated that the central issue at stake is regional, not local.

For Israel the issue is not simply the Palestinians and their actions, including the rocket fire into Israel. It is the broader problem of radical Islam — of [Hamas](#), as a part of the regional Muslim Brotherhood, and of [Iran](#), a serious regional power with considerable influence on [Syria](#), [Hezbollah](#), [Islamic Jihad](#) and the military wing of Hamas.

While Israel and the United States still hope that Hamas, which is a largely homegrown Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, will respond to the responsibilities of elected leadership and moderate its rejection of Israel to bring a better life to its people, they have no such hopes for Iran.

Iran's president has famously denied the Holocaust and made countless provocative statements about Israel. But even before his election, Iran committed itself to undermining any prospect of real peace between Israel and the Palestinians through proxy forces like Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and the Palestinian group Islamic Jihad.

Iran is also considered to be the main sponsor of Khaled Meshal, the exiled Palestinian leader of Hamas's political bureau and the man widely considered to be in charge of Hamas's secretive military wing — which was instrumental in carrying out the seizure of Cpl. Gilad Shalit, touching off the latest explosion.

That seizure came as the Hamas government, led by Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, was finishing negotiations with the more moderate [Palestinian Authority](#) president, [Mahmoud Abbas](#), on a political document that might have allowed the renewal of negotiations with Israel.

On June 22, only three days before Corporal Shalit was abducted, Mr. Abbas and the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, were hugging and kissing each other, however reluctantly, at a breakfast whose hosts were King [Abdullah II](#) of Jordan and [Elie Wiesel](#), a Nobel laureate. There, the two leaders promised to meet in two weeks, and both have said since that Mr. Olmert promised an important release of Palestinian prisoners to celebrate a new relationship.

But the soldier crisis has drowned that initiative, as it has drowned the internal Palestinian negotiations and reduced Mr. Haniya and Mr. Abbas, at least for the moment, to near irrelevance. It has bolstered the power of Mr. Meshal and the militants.

The tactics of the raid into Israel, through a tunnel, to capture a soldier for a bargaining chip, come straight out of the playbook of Hezbollah, which has successfully negotiated prisoner exchanges with Israel in the past. While Mr. Olmert says he wants to change the equation by refusing to negotiate, Hezbollah proved Wednesday with its border raid and seizure of Israeli soldiers that it had refined its tactics.

So there is considerable speculation among Israelis and Palestinians about whether Hezbollah and Mr. Meshal, and through him the Hamas military wing, coordinated the manner and timing of the raid to capture the corporal or whether, ultimately, the decision was Iran's.

An Arab intelligence officer working in a country neighboring Israel said it appeared that Iran — through Hezbollah — had given support to Mr. Meshal to stage the seizure of Corporal Shalit. The officer said the Shalit case, even before the capture of two more Israeli soldiers, amounted to Hezbollah and Iran sending a message: “If you want to hurt us, there are tools that we have and that we can use against you.”

Israeli intelligence officers and analysts say they believe that the message is primarily Iran's, acting through Hezbollah and Mr. Meshal.

Itamar Rabinovich, former Israeli ambassador to Washington and chief negotiator with Syria on a peace treaty that never quite materialized, sees Iran "on a roll, looking for regional hegemony." Even without nuclear weapons, Iran is acquiring considerable influence in Lebanon, in Syria and with the Palestinians, not to speak of Iraq.

"It can directly operate Hezbollah in southern Lebanon through Syria, and with Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the territories it can detonate the situation whenever it wants," Mr. Rabinovich said.

On a more local level, Israeli officials complain regularly of what they call the Palestinians' inability to take responsibility for their own welfare and for policing themselves and, particularly, the militant groups.

Palestinians regularly complain that Israel has made it impossible to exercise authority under conditions of occupation, even in the Gaza Strip, where Israel controls the borders, seacoast and airspace. They also insist that as long as Israel occupies the West Bank and intends to keep a portion of land it took in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the Palestinians must continue to fight for a just settlement.

The loss of confidence on both sides is extreme, which is why Mr. Olmert has decided that Israel must act to control its own security in Gaza and not expect Egypt or the Palestinians — especially not Hamas — to do it for them, suggests Gerald M. Steinberg of Bar-Ilan University near Tel Aviv.

"Israel is in a long-term operation to reassert security control," Mr. Steinberg said. Mr. Olmert must try to stop the firing of Qassam rockets on Israel and the smuggling of weapons and expertise from Egypt if he hopes to carry through his plan to pull up to 70,000 Israeli settlers out of the West Bank.

In Gaza itself, Mr. Steinberg suggests, Israel is in a bind. Some want to ensure that the Hamas leadership, with its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, Syria and Iran, does not become entrenched in power.

Others want to try to split or moderate Hamas, saying that if Hamas and the Palestinian Authority are destroyed, the result could be a chaos of gangs, clans and global terrorism that would be harder to deal with than the Hamas government.

“It’s a tough decision, and I don’t think the government has decided yet,” Mr. Steinberg said. But the events in Lebanon are likely to make Mr. Olmert’s choices even more complicated.

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