

MID-EAST MESS

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In the fall of 1976, with no personal experience of the region, I enrolled in a graduate seminar on the Middle East at Columbia University. I had just finished a summer in Washington, D.C., doing research on U.S. policy towards Iran and Iraq, and would be turning my research into a master's thesis.

The tensions of the 1973 war still ran high, and ever since I listened to my fellow students back then, many of them from the Middle East, angrily shouting their disagreements at one another, I have had a gut feeling that the political and security issues in the region are intractable. That class seemed like a microcosm of the Middle East itself, and in the ensuing years I generally avoided discussions of events in that troubled region.

So it was in a less than optimistic mood that I packed my bags in the early 1990s for a trip to Israel. My friend Shai Feldman at Tel Aviv University's Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies had an interesting idea – to bring experts involved in ending the U.S.-Soviet Cold War together with Israeli and Arab scholars and officials to identify lessons from the East-West conflict that might apply to the Middle East.

Before starting the conference in Tel Aviv, we spent a few days touring the most sensitive sites for Israeli security, our bus accompanied by a military escort. We met with the Israeli army command on the Golan Heights and lunched with them at their post suspended high over the Jordan River. We trod the rocky ground of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, careful to avoid still-active landmines. We skirted the West Bank at Jericho due to safety concerns, ventured cautiously into the kidnapping-prone Old City in Jerusalem and viewed Palestinian towns in the Gaza Strip. We also managed an overnight stay at a kibbutz and a soak in the hot springs at Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee.

Then we settled down to the conference. From the well-known U.S.-Soviet hotline to measures that might prevent the military on either side from jumping the gun and turning

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a small crisis into a major conflict, we discussed the modest “confidence-building” accords that had made the military confrontation of the Cold War a little bit safer. And we examined how verification procedures that had been developed to monitor whether the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were complying with arms accords might be applied in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, despite invitations to others, the only Arab representatives at our conference were from Egypt. Syria, Lebanon and Jordan were the front-line states with which Israel might best have contemplated such confidence-building measures. But we had a productive discussion anyway, of how, for instance, an agreement between Israel and Syria for prior notifications of troop movements around the Golan Heights might prevent a routine movement of forces on either side from being seen as a real impending military attack and triggering a military response. Our ideas were later distributed to scholars and policymakers in the Middle East and beyond, in the form of papers and a book.

But then a new spate of violence broke out in the region, including the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin. Confidence-building measures were not easily implemented when tension was high between Israel and its neighbors.

Observing the escalating pattern of violence between Israel and Hezbollah in July and August of this year, it seems to me that Shai Feldman's insights 15 years ago continue to ring true. The current cycle of conflict began with a Hezbollah attack and incursion across the Israeli border to abduct Israeli soldiers, which, with an Israeli counterattack, escalated to all-out war. At this writing, 600 Lebanese and 90 Israelis are dead, and over 3,400 wounded on both sides.

What if Lebanon and Israel had agreed to quietly share intelligence about Hezbollah military movements? What if an agreed procedure had been in place between Israel and Lebanon for steps to be taken to restrain Hezbollah, short of an all-out military conflict, if a provocative attack by Hezbollah occurred? Unilateral military action is always an option, and can be exercised if such alternatives fail.

The time to negotiate such procedures is when relations are calm, of course, not in the throes of crisis. People may say that Israel cannot negotiate with a state like Lebanon, or that Lebanon cannot control Hezbollah. And it might be said that unless Israel responds strongly to such incursions, more of them will occur. But the initial Hezbollah attack may have been a provocation for exactly the sort of violence that was then unleashed, which inflames anti-Israel and anti-U.S. attitudes in the Arab world. Neither the bloodshed from repeated episodes like the current one or more hatred of the U.S. and its allies are attractive outcomes. When the situation calms, perhaps the subject of confidence-building measures can be revisited. Ω