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Beyond Lebanon

This Is the Time for a U.S.-Led Comprehensive Settlement

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By Brent Scowcroft
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Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has stated that a simple cease-fire in Lebanon is not the solution to the current violence. She says it is necessary to deal with the roots of the problem. She is right on both counts. But Hezbollah is not the source of the problem; it is a derivative of the cause, which is the tragic conflict over Palestine that began in 1948.

The eastern shore of the Mediterranean is in turmoil from end to end, a repetition of continuing conflicts in one part or another since the abortive attempts of the United Nations to create separate Israeli and Palestinian states in 1948. The current conflagration has energized the world. Now, perhaps more than ever, we have an opportunity to harness that concern and energy to achieve a comprehensive resolution of the entire 58-year-old tragedy. Only the United States can lead the effort required to seize this opportunity.

The outlines of a comprehensive settlement have been apparent since President Bill Clinton's efforts collapsed in 2000. The major elements would include:

- A Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, with minor rectifications agreed upon between Palestine and Israel.
- Palestinians giving up the right of return and Israel reciprocating by removing its settlements in the West Bank, again with rectifications as mutually agreed. Those displaced on both sides would receive compensation from the international community.
- King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia unambiguously reconfirming his 2002 pledge that the Arab world is prepared to enter into full normal relations with Israel upon its withdrawal from the lands occupied in 1967.
- Egypt and Saudi Arabia working with the Palestinian Authority to put together a government along the lines of the 18-point agreement reached between Hamas and Fatah prisoners in Israeli jails in June. This government would negotiate for the Authority.
- Deployment, as part of a cease-fire, of a robust international force in southern Lebanon.
- Deployment of another international force to facilitate and supervise traffic to and from Gaza and the West Bank.
- Designation of Jerusalem as the shared capital of Israel and Palestine, with appropriate international guarantees of freedom of movement and civic life in the city.

These elements are well-known to people who live in the region and to those outside who have labored over the decades seeking to shape a lasting peace. What seems breathtakingly complicated, however, is how one mobilizes the necessary political will, in the region and beyond, to transform these principles

into an agreement on a lasting accord.

The current crisis in Lebanon provides a historic opportunity to achieve what has seemed impossible. That said, it is too much to expect those most directly implicated -- Israeli and Palestinian leaders -- to lead the way. That responsibility falls to others, principally the United States, which alone can mobilize the international community and Israel and the Arab states for the task that has defeated so many previous efforts.

How would such a process be organized? The obvious vehicle to direct the process would be the Quartet (the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations), established in 2001 for just such a purpose. The Quartet, beginning at the foreign-minister level, would first organize the necessary international force for southern Lebanon and Gaza and then call for a cease-fire. The security force would have to have the mandate and capability to deal firmly with acts of violence. Ideally, this would be a NATO, or at least NATO-led, contingent. Recognizing the political obstacles, the fact is that direct U.S. participation in such a force would be highly desirable -- and perhaps even essential -- for persuading our friends and allies to contribute the capabilities required.

With a cease-fire and international security force in place, the Quartet would then construct a framework for negotiating the specific elements of a comprehensive settlement, after which Israel, the Palestinian Authority and appropriate Arab state representatives (e.g. Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon) would be added to the process to complete the detailed negotiations.

The benefits of reaching a comprehensive settlement of the root cause of today's turmoil would likely ripple well beyond the Israelis and the Palestinians. A comprehensive peace settlement would not only defang the radicals in Lebanon and Palestine (and their supporters in other countries), it would also reduce the influence of Iran -- the country that, under its current ideology, poses the greatest potential threat to stability in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt and Jordan.

A comprehensive settlement also would allow Arab leaders to focus on what most say is a primary concern: modernizing their countries to provide jobs and productive lives for their rapidly growing populations.

Removing the argument that nothing can be done because domestic constituencies are fixated on the "plight of the Palestinians" would allow creative energy, talent and money to be rechanneled into education, health, housing, etc. This would have the added benefit of addressing conditions that encourage far too many young Arabs to glorify terrorism as a legitimate means for dealing with the challenges of the modern world.

It is even possible that a comprehensive settlement might help stabilize Iraq. A chastened Iran, bereft of the "Israeli card," might be more willing to reach a modus vivendi with the Sunnis and Kurds in Iraq, and with the United States as well. All countries in the region -- not to mention Iraq itself -- need a stable, prosperous and peaceful Iraq. The road to achieving this may well lead eastward from a Jerusalem shared peacefully by Israelis and Palestinians.

This latest in a seemingly endless series of conflagrations in the region just may present a unique opportunity to change the situation in the Middle East for the better for all time. Let us not shrink from the task.

The writer was national security adviser to Presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush. He is now president of the Forum for International Policy.

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