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Failed U.S. policies caused the mess in Lebanon.

By Daniel Benjamin

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The most frequent criticism about U.S. policy in Lebanon is that we are up a creek without a paddle because for years the Bush administration has not been talking to two of the chief malefactors in this crackup: Hezbollah's sponsors, Syria and Iran. This is true, and it will hinder our ability to achieve a cease-fire and a longer-term resolution. But it is a footnote to a bigger failure, namely that the immolation of Lebanon is the natural consequence of U.S. policy toward Iran in particular and the greater Middle East in general.

How, you ask, could an administration that put Iran smack dab in the middle of the "[axis of evil](#)" in early 2002 and that has never relented in its denunciation of the clerics in Tehran be accused of opening the door to this catastrophe? The answer lies in the contrast between the appearance of hostility and the reality that American policy has consistently reduced the pressure on Iran to behave and has thus emboldened it to take a more aggressive course.

First, it is important to understand the Iran-Hezbollah relationship. Yes, Hezbollah is a Lebanese political party and social-welfare organization, but as a terrorist organization, it is an arm of Tehran. Everyone, it seems, has become so accustomed to hearing about the independence of terrorist groups like al-Qaida and its imitators that we have forgotten that some terrorists have state sponsors—and it would be hard to find any that are more creatures of their masters than Hezbollah is of Tehran. Syria provides the group with a supply line to Tehran, and it has an interest in supporting the group's effort to bleed Israel. But it is Tehran that provides the \$100 million or more per year in funds and arms, as well as the organization's strategic direction. (For more on Iran's relationship with Hezbollah and other global terror groups, see "[Proxy Power](#)," by Daniel Byman.)

As former Middle East envoy Dennis Ross has [noted](#), Hezbollah had respected the Israeli-Lebanese border (save for a contested postage stamp of territory called Shebaa Farms) for the six years since Ehud Barak pulled Israeli troops out of southern Lebanon. Although Hezbollah may have had an interest in carrying out the latest attack as a push-back against internal Lebanese pressure to disarm, it is difficult to imagine that the group would have kidnapped two Israeli soldiers and killed several others without orders from Iran.

The context for Iranian approval for the attacks is five years of unintended U.S. assistance to the theocrats of Tehran. By toppling the Taliban in 2001-02, the United States removed the threat to Iran's east. The Taliban were not a great danger to Iran, but, in a foretaste of the sectarian murderousness of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, they had the habit of slaughtering Hazaras, the Shiites of Afghanistan's western provinces, whose protection is an Iranian concern. The Taliban also murdered nine Iranian diplomats in 1998, almost causing a war.

Dispatching the Taliban was a small favor compared with the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime, which had been the biggest check on Tehran since the two countries' war of 1980-88, in which Iran suffered roughly 1 million casualties in some of the most senseless fighting since the trench warfare of World War I. As home of the Iranian opposition Mujahedin e-Khalq, Iraq remained a permanent thorn in the clerics' side.

The Bush administration believed that the post-9/11 wars would result in U.S. troops and American-leaning regimes on either side of Iran and therefore a more airtight containment of the Islamic republic. With all its prewar talk of "shock and awe," the Bush team was also convinced that the demonstration effect of U.S. military power would have the mullahs quivering in their robes.

It didn't work out that way. No one can say if any U.S. occupation would have worked out, but if the Pentagon had put 400,000 troops on the ground in Iraq, the chances are greater that the Sunni insurgency could have been extinguished early on, and Iran would have felt significant pressure even as a Shiite majority came to power in Baghdad. But the comprehensive botch of the occupation has had the opposite effect. One Middle Eastern diplomat put it perfectly last week when he told me the Iranians have the United States exactly where they want it: tied down in Iraq, overcommitted, and incapable of acting.

As Steven Simon and Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations pointed out in a *Washington Post* [op-ed](#), the 135,000 overburdened U.S. troops are potential hostages—or targets—for Iran should the United States take military action to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. With many of Iraq's Shiite militias and major Shiite political organizations subsidized by Tehran, life for the U.S. forces could become very unpleasant very quickly. America has waged two wars in five years; Iran has been the big winner.

It's also important to note that the Bush administration did not just put all its military eggs in the Iraqi basket; it put all its diplomatic efforts there too. The administration refused to engage Iran directly after the 2002 revelation of Iran's clandestine nuclear programs, instead sending numerous rhetorical signals that the Islamic republic was also destined for a U.S.-engineered regime change. That was not, as *Slate's* Fred Kaplan has [pointed out](#), a good way to persuade the leadership that it should forswear nuclear weapons.

Washington has also been frustrated by its inability to persuade Russia and China to support a Security Council resolution against Iran under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter, which would make the issue "a threat to peace." Those countries do not want to see a repeat of 2003, when Washington, citing earlier U.N. Chapter VII resolutions against Iraq, appointed itself to enforce them without an additional vote. Moscow and Beijing are not prepared to legitimize U.S. efforts to be a globo-cop, even though the indications of Iran's desire to acquire nuclear weapons are far more numerous and concrete than Saddam's were after 1991.

The sum of all these missteps is that the Iranians feel they are in the driver's seat. When Condoleezza Rice persuaded Bush to commit his about-face in June and offer a package of incentives and direct talks over the nuclear issue, the Iranians felt confident enough to ignore our deadlines and tell us they'd get back to us in late August. Hezbollah's kidnapping of the Israeli soldiers should also be seen as a response to U.S. pressure on the nuclear issue: By having terrorists nab the Israelis, the Iranians both upended the G8 summit discussions about their nuclear program and sent a clear reminder of the tools at their disposal should there be a confrontation. They probably miscalculated regarding Israel's reaction, but the message was unmistakable.

That Iran has broad regional ambitions—to steal the mantle of leadership in the Arab-Israeli conflict, ride the Shiite revival that began with the fall of Saddam, and fulfill its ambition to become a regional hegemon—is increasingly clear. The containment strategy that had held the line on Iran for more than a decade looks to be in tatters.

It is tempting to say that the destruction of Lebanon is the culmination of the administration's failed policy for the region. At this point, though, that might just be too optimistic.

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