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The Alternative Middle East Quartet

DESPITE THE CEASE-FIRE, THE REGION IS MORE VOLATILE THAN EVER.

By *Ian Bremmer*

Posted Wednesday, Aug. 16, 2006, at 3:43 PM ET



Muqtada Sadr

There was something very familiar in Israel's recent conflict with Hezbollah. We'd seen the rocket launches, the civilian deaths, and the exchange of threats and demands before, when Israel occupied parts of Lebanon between 1982 and 2000. But there was also a feeling that something new was at stake—that the conflict signaled that a new and more dangerous era in the region had begun.

In the Middle East, the mere threat of turmoil can spook global energy markets.

Concern that the dispute over Iran's nuclear program will escalate—a cut in Iranian oil supply, Iranian threats to block tanker traffic through the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz, a U.S. or Israeli military strike—have already helped push global markets down, gold up, and oil prices toward \$80 per barrel. None of these threats has yet materialized, though all three are growing.

Some argue that the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel was just one more example of the seemingly endless back and forth between Israel and its most hostile neighbors. Lebanon and Israel are *not* oil exporters, and Arab states were relatively restrained in their reaction. But fury over the bloodshed in Lebanon is now intimately linked with the broader struggle for dominance in the region. In particular, it exacerbated the already growing tensions between Shiite and Sunni Muslims.

Several factors delayed outside efforts to end the violence—and will limit the international community's ability to ensure it doesn't begin anew. First, Washington's role in Israel's relations with its neighbors isn't what it used to be. The Bush administration has devoted what's left of its international political capital to helping build a stable Iraq, thwarting Iran's nuclear ambitions, responding to threats from North Korea, and managing increasingly complex relations with China and Russia. Little time and energy were left for the sort of shuttle diplomacy these bursts of Middle Eastern hostility have historically demanded. Without strong U.S. leadership, the other members of the so-called Quartet on the Middle East (the European Union, United Nations, and Russia) can do little to arbitrate future regional disputes.

Second, there is an alternative quartet. Its members fueled the conflict in hopes of undermining Israeli stability and U.S. influence in the region. Hezbollah, *Iran*, *Syria*, and Muqtada

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