

Bush wants much more than ceremonial diplomacy

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Washington

It is not to be. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, a more than passable classical pianist, had blocked time in her summer diary for a pleasant meeting with some of the 700 music students attending classes and performing at the Aspen Music Festival and School.

President Bush has other ideas. Instead of the cool breezes of the Rocky Mountains, Rice will find herself in the hotter-than-hot Middle East, attempting to bring an end to the two-front war in which Israel finds itself engaged which, in past flare-ups, has been bad news for the Israelis.

Rice presides over a department that traditionally holds that almost any deal is better than no deal at all. The President is hoping that his Secretary of State and long-time foreign policy adviser can bring that bureaucracy to heel. A President who reacted to the September 11 attack on his country by invading Afghanistan and Iraq, and is committed to fundamental change in the Middle East, is not inclined to advise Israel to be 'restrained'. After all, America's only ally in the region has already tolerated a rain of 800 Hamas rockets in the past year alone, as well as continuous shelling of its northern cities by Hezbollah.

What the President hopes to avoid is a repetition of past cycles, which have run something like this. Hamas makes life dangerous and miserable for Israelis by lobbing rockets into civilian areas, and sending in suicide bombers, some so young that they didn't know quite what to do with the 72 virgins that many Muslims believe await these martyrs in heaven. Hezbollah bombards Israel with its Iranian- and Syrian-supplied Katyusha rockets, of which it has about 12,000, and more advanced versions based on Chinese technology, while 2,000 UN peacekeepers remain sublimely indifferent to a breach of the peace they are supposed to keep.

Finally, as the usual cycle proceeds, Israel responds by trying to take out the missile sites, and to recover its kidnapped soldiers. Because the terrorists locate their offices, launchers and bomb-making factories in densely populated urban areas, there is unavoidable collateral damage. The civilian casualties, repeatedly shown on Arab-friendly television channels such as the BBC and CNN, prompt 'the international community', whatever that is, to dub the Israeli response 'disproportionate', whatever that means, and to pressure the American President to pressure the Israelis to stand down. He dispatches an envoy to the area with orders to shuttle between the parties until a deal is reached to end hostilities, allowing the terrorists to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

That, at least, is the progress of events for which the commentariat are pressing in their television appearances and in their columns. To many of them, this conversion of the terrorists into innocent underdogs, and the Israelis into heartless child-killers, comes quite naturally. The leader of Britain's Middle East press corps, the Independent's Robert Fisk, puts it this way: 'You could see the Israeli missiles coming through the clouds of smoke, hurtling like thunderbolts into the apartment blocks of Ghobeiri ... The few who were not lying in their basements ran shrieking through the streets — not gunmen, but women with screaming children ... The exchange rate for death in this filthy war is now approximately

one Israeli to five Lebanese.’

But there is a chance that we might not have to watch another replay of this tired old film: scene one, terror attack; scene two, Israeli response; scene three America pressures Israel to cease fire before it has eliminated the threat to its existence from those pledged to expunge ‘the Zionist entity’ from the face of the earth.

We might be treated to a new film, for two reasons. First, Bush is aiming for a long-term solution rather than a short-term fix. Second, the President is well aware that the terrorist groups are funded by and are acting as proxies for Iran and Syria, both of which nations have allowed jihadists to pour across their borders into Iraq. Israel’s enemies are America’s enemies, and the sooner Hezbollah is put out of business, the better.

True, both terror groups had their own reasons for launching this two-front war. Hamas raised the temperature to prevent Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian President, from conducting a referendum to test the extent of support for Hamas’s refusal to sign on to the two-state solution. And Hezbollah made its move in order to recapture centre-stage lest it become increasingly marginalised in a prosperous and peaceful Lebanon.

But neither would have been able to engineer their cross-border killings and kidnappings without the financial support and the missiles provided by Iran and Syria. This is why Bush, failing to notice an open microphone at the G8 summit in St Petersburg, told not only Tony Blair but the world, ‘See, the irony is that what they [the UN] need to do is get Syria to get Hezbollah to stop doing this sh*t, then it’s over.’

Bush subsequently also turned on Iran, calling for its isolation. With reason, even apart from its nuclear ambitions. That nation’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has assumed the role of spokesman for Hezbollah, telling the audience of Iranian television’s Channel One, ‘The American President says Hezbollah must be disarmed ... This will not happen.’ He should know: Iran is Hezbollah’s chief weapons supplier, a role its officials deny with the same straight faces worn when they denied that Iran has a programme to produce nuclear weapons.

Iran’s key role in the current conflict scares the hell out of its Arab neighbours. Hassan Nasrallah, leader of a large part of Lebanon’s Shia Muslim community and boss of Hezbollah, has announced, ‘Hezbollah is not fighting a battle for Hezbollah or even for Lebanon. We are now fighting a battle for the Islamic nation,’ in which he includes Iran. That’s a call to war which the governments of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and several Gulf states have no intention of heeding, lest they play into the hands of non-Arab Iran, a country they have always feared. So, for the first time these key Arab governments are criticising Hezbollah for ‘unexpected, inappropriate and irresponsible acts’.

If Rice really wants to turn her trip into more than a ceremonial visit, she has to do three things. First, allow Israel to finish the job of creating a buffer zone between itself and Hezbollah. Second, persuade Arab regimes to stand with America when the question of Iran’s nuclear programme comes before the UN.

Third, and most important, she must recognise that this war is only partly between ‘the Zionist entity’ and the terrorists who would drive the Israelis into the sea. It is also between what Nasrallah calls the Islamic nation, on the one side, and America, Britain and the West

on the other. If Bush really wants to plant the seeds of democracy in the extraordinarily parched soil of the Middle East, his charismatic Secretary of State will have to eschew the quick celebrity that comes from negotiating a ceasefire before Israel gets its own and the West's business done.

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