

It's the Middle East, Stupid

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It begins with a single Qassam rocket, one of the thousands of homemade projectiles fired in recent years by the Islamic radicals of Hamas from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel. The rockets have made life nightmarish for many Israelis but have largely missed their targets. But this one gets "lucky": It smashes into an elementary school, wounding 40 children and killing 15.

The Israeli government, which had heretofore responded to the Qassams with airstrikes and small ground raids, cannot resist the nationwide demand for action. Within hours, tens of thousands of Israeli troops and hundreds of tanks are rushing into Gaza, battling house-to-house in teeming refugee camps. Just as swiftly, Palestinian officials accuse Israel of perpetrating a massacre and invite the foreign press to photograph the corpse-strewn rubble. The images flash around the Middle East on al-Jazeera TV and trigger violent demonstrations in Arab capitals.

Hezbollah, the radical Lebanese Shiite militia, then gets into the act, raining Katyusha rockets on northern Israel. But when Israeli warplanes bomb the Katyusha batteries, Syria leaps in, sending its commandos to retaliate by capturing key Israeli bunkers atop the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Israel's counterattack succeeds only in precipitating a hailstorm of Syrian Scud-D missiles, some armed with chemical warheads, into Israeli cities. Then, just as Israeli planes are incinerating the main electrical plant in Damascus, the first of hundreds of Shehab-3 rockets, pre-targeted at Tel Aviv, lift off from Tehran.

Sound fantastical or too horrific to ponder? Not to Israeli intelligence analysts it doesn't. The Israeli military recently conducted a round of large-scale war games based precisely on this scenario. In some rounds, Israel managed to humble Hamas and Hezbollah while shooting down most of the Iranian and Syrian rockets with its own Arrow and Patriot antimissile systems. But other forecasts went far less well: Israel survives but barely, with its cities devastated and countless civilians killed.

This is the mess that will soon land in the lap of President Clinton, President Obama or President McCain. Despite the shadows of 9/11 and Iraq, the U.S. primary season thus far has been dominated by the economy. But it's a mistake to assume that the next presidency will be. Instead of a honeymoon, the new president could inherit a brush fire raging out of control in a volatile region where U.S. involvement has never been deeper. Would he or she merely convene the U.N. Security Council, or rush to Israel's defense? And how, in the event of a general Middle East war, would the president safeguard the woefully exposed U.S. forces in Iraq?

The Middle East will continue to be the source of the gravest threats to U.S. security, whether in the long-term form of a nuclear-armed Iran or the short-term one of an unforeseen multistate war. So the candidates must be pressed about how they would handle a chain reaction in which events in Gaza suddenly engulf the entire region. To borrow an old slogan: It's the Middle East, stupid.

The possibility that a border scrap between Israelis and Palestinians could ignite a regional conflagration should not be too surprising. A very similar concatenation of events led to the most volcanic eruption in the region's modern history, irreparably convulsing the Middle East and carving many of the furrows that still destabilize it.

That conflict, too, began with Palestinian attacks into Israel, a series of Israeli reprisals and a mass clamoring for revenge. The countdown began just over 43 years ago, on New Year's Eve, 1964, when Palestinian guerrillas belonging to the Fatah faction crossed the Lebanese border to attack Israel. Though the infiltrators were intercepted, Fatah's leader, Yasser Arafat, declared the raid a heroic victory and dared Arab rulers to match his audacity.

Few could. The Arab world at the time was split between two warring camps: the socialist, pro-Soviet dictators in Egypt, Syria and Iraq and the conservative, pro-Western monarchs in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and elsewhere. Egypt's fiery leader, Gamal Abdul Nasser, gleefully branded King Hussein of Jordan a Zionist "whore," ratcheting up the tension by hinting that the kings were American lackeys. Despite the rhetoric, Arab rulers did not really want war with Israel. But Arafat's challenge left them little choice.

Nasser responded by ordering the Palestine Liberation Organization, originally established as an Egyptian propaganda tool, to launch its own cross-border attacks. The Israelis lashed back, blowing up Fatah's West Bank headquarters. Jordan accused Nasser of "hiding behind the skirts" of the U.N. peacekeepers deployed in the Sinai to separate Egypt and Israel. Mortified, Nasser ousted the U.N. forces on May 15, 1967, and closed a strategic Red Sea shipping route to Israeli vessels. Suddenly, Nasser was the champion of the Arab "street," hailed by huge demonstrations that demanded Israel's destruction. The Arab world closed ranks behind him. Shorn of international allies, Israelis were convinced that they faced annihilation.

But then Israel struck first. On the morning of June 5, Israeli warplanes obliterated almost the entire Egyptian air force, and Israeli tanks rumbled through Gaza and Sinai. At the end of six days of fighting, Israel had nearly quadrupled the territories under its control, among them the West Bank, the Golan Heights and Gaza. A new era -- and new sources of Middle East bloodshed -- had emerged.

Much has since changed in the Middle East. The Cold War is largely forgotten, as is the 1960s enmity among most Arab regimes. Israel remains a powerhouse, with more high-tech companies than Western Europe, an ironclad alliance with the United States and (it's widely assumed) a nuclear arsenal. Arafat's successor, Mahmoud Abbas, now rules the West Bank as the head of a Palestinian Authority publicly committed to coexistence with the Jewish state.

But for all these transformations, the Middle East remains the same explosive context of conflict it was in the 1960s. The region is still bitterly divided -- not between Arab nationalism and conservatism but between religious moderation and the surge of Islamist extremism spurred, in part, by the Six-Day War. Backed by Syria and Iran, a phalanx of terrorist groups threatens Israeli and Arab societies alike. Israel has peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and is engaged again in peace talks with the Palestinians, but it is still an object of abomination for the overwhelming majority of Middle Easterners. And violence in Gaza -- now run by a democratically elected Hamas government -- can still spark turbulent demonstrations throughout the region's streets.

If anything, the Middle East is even more flammable today than in the 1960s because of the countless thousands of short- and long-range missiles in its armies' arsenals. These weapons vastly amplify the potential destruction of any military confrontation while slashing the amount of decision-making time that might be needed to avert all-out war. And modern weapons, including unconventional ones, make everything scarier. A conflict between Israel and Iran might not last six days but six hours, unleashing shock waves even more seismic than those of 1967.

Contemporary Middle Eastern leaders cannot afford to ignore these lessons. Neither can decision-makers -- and would-be ones -- in the United States. Though the waning Bush administration is focused on trying to reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty, shore up Iraq and flex its muscles at Iran, it should not downplay the danger that a seemingly limited border skirmish could rapidly escalate into a regional catastrophe.

Nor should Bush's heir. The next commander in chief may have to proceed directly from the inauguration to the Situation Room to try to defuse a Middle Eastern crisis of monumental dimensions. That moment could be a single Qassam away.