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## **TURMOIL IN THE MIDEAST: NEWS ANALYSIS; U.S., Needing Options, Finds Its Hands Tied**

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By and large, the Bush administration has sought to deal with the Middle East in bold strokes, emphasizing regime change and democracy but spurning the garden-variety diplomacy of mediating conflicts between Israel and its rivals.

One tenet of that approach is that certain countries -- Iran in particular, but also Syria -- are such rogues that they should be ostracized, not engaged. But now, as cross-border attacks between Israel and the militant groups Hamas and Hezbollah threaten to ignite a wider conflict, President Bush and his secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, are confronting the limits of the course they have chosen.

"If Condi Rice decided she wanted to do diplomacy, what would she do?" asked Aaron David Miller, who was a senior adviser for Arab-Israeli relations at the State Department under the last three presidents. The two countries that wield the most influence over Hezbollah and Hamas -- Iran and Syria -- are the same ones the administration has kept at arm's length.

The value of the Bush approach has been its moral clarity and consistency, eschewing, in a post-Sept. 11 world, any deal-making with those thought to support terrorists. Both Hamas and Hezbollah are viewed as terrorist organizations, and by that logic, Syria and Iran are on the wrong side of the divide.

In practice, the Bush doctrine leaves the door open for American contacts with Israel, Egypt, Jordan and a handful of others. But it has limited dealings with Syria and Iran to little more than oratory, in the form of calls on Damascus and Tehran to rein in Hamas and Hezbollah.

The Bush administration's policy of not talking to rogue regimes "takes you only so far, until you do want something from them," said Robert Malley, a Clinton administration official and negotiator in the failed Camp David talks, who is now the Middle East program director at the International Crisis Group. "The problem is, now we want something from them."

Sean McCormack, the State Department spokesman, defended the administration's policy. "You do what's effective," Mr. McCormack said. "What you have is a situation where on one side are Syria, Iran and these terrorist groups, and on the other side you have everybody else. It's a matter of marshaling the international community against them."

For now, Mr. Bush has sent Elliott L. Abrams, a deputy national security adviser, and David Welch, an assistant secretary of state, to Israel and to Palestinian-controlled areas to talk to officials there about the spiraling hostilities. But the United States does not talk to Tehran, and its communications with Syria are few; Mr. Bush recalled his ambassador to Syria, Margaret Scobey, after the assassination in Lebanon of Rafik Hariri, a former Lebanese prime minister, in February 2005.

That has left the administration to subcontract its diplomacy to others -- the United Nations, Europe, Egypt, Jordan. None are superpowers, and their influence has been limited. On Friday, Mr. Bush did reach out to some partners, among them King Abdullah II of Jordan, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Prime Minister Fouad Siniora of Lebanon. Tony Snow, the White House spokesman, said Mr. Bush

was pleased that Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia "do not look on Hezbollah as being a legitimate government entity."

The United Nations has sent a delegation to Cairo to talk to Egyptian officials.

The administration may yet reconsider its approach in light of the escalating tensions. After all, Ms. Rice has already gone further toward traditional diplomacy than many neoconservatives within the administration would like, by prodding Mr. Bush to offer to join European talks with Iran on Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

Officials in Washington say Iran has helped to build up Hezbollah's arsenal of rockets, including the ones that are now being lobbed at Israel. Officials also say Iran has outfitted Hezbollah with modernized Katyusha rockets that can penetrate almost twice as far into Israel as the nine miles that were the range of the standard rockets used by the militant group in the past.

American intelligence agencies in Washington also believe that Iran may have provided Hezbollah militants with an arsenal of Fajr-5 rockets, which are among its most modern, with an estimated range of about 40 miles.

Some Middle East watchers say that if things continue to spiral downward, American diplomats may have no choice but to reach out to Syria at least, even if it is through a back channel.

During a similar crisis a decade ago, the Clinton administration used traditional shuttle diplomacy to defuse a Hezbollah-Israel conflict that also threatened to spin out of control. For 10 days, Warren Christopher, then the secretary of state, bounced between Damascus, Beirut and Jerusalem until he finally was able to get the 1996 cease-fire arrangement that restricted Israel and Hezbollah to fighting each other without terrorizing civilian populations.

Publicly, Bush administration officials say the strategy of depending on others to pressure Syria and Iran is best for now.

But even some of Mr. Bush's staunchest allies are starting to sound an alarm. Senator John W. Warner, the Virginia Republican, released a statement on Friday calling on the administration to "think through very carefully how Israel's extraordinary reaction could affect our operations in Iraq and our joint diplomatic efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue."

Mr. Warner added, "This is a very critical time for the U.S. in the Middle East, and the Israeli actions will certainly have an impact beyond Lebanon and Gaza."