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Is a new war in the Middle East becoming inevitable?

By Volker Perthes

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Fouad Siniora, Lebanon's former prime minister, is a thoughtful man with deep experience in Middle Eastern politics. So when he speaks of "trains with no drivers that seem to be on a collision course," as he recently did at a private meeting in Berlin, interested parties should probably prepare for unwanted developments. Of course, no one in the region is calling for war. But a pre-war mood is growing.

Four factors, none of them new but each destabilizing on its own, are compounding one another: lack of hope, dangerous governmental policies, a regional power vacuum, and the absence of active external mediation.

It may be reassuring that most Palestinians and Israelis still favor a two-state solution. It is less reassuring that most Israelis and a large majority of Palestinians have lost hope that such a solution will ever materialize. Add to this that by September, the partial settlement freeze, which Israel's government has accepted, will expire, and that the period set by the Arab League for the so-called proximity talks between the Palestinians and Israelis, which have not seriously begun, will also be over.

Serious direct negotiations are unlikely to begin without a freeze on settlement building, which Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is unlikely to announce or

implement, given resistance within his coalition government. Syria, which until the end of 2008 was engaged in its own Turkish-mediated proximity talks with Israel, does not expect a resumption of talks with Israel anytime soon. This may be one reason why Syrian President Bashar Assad mentions war as an option, as he recently did in Madrid.

Moreover, Israelis and people close to Hizbullah in Lebanon are talking about “another round,” while many pundits in the Middle East believe that a limited war could unblock a stagnant political situation. Their point of reference is the 1973 war, which helped to bring about peace between Egypt and Israel. But the wars that followed, and the latest wars in the region – the 2006 Lebanon war and the December 2008-January 2009 Gaza war – do not support this reckless theory.

Iran, whose influence in the Levant is not so much the cause of unresolved problems in the Middle East as the result of them, continues to defy the imposition of new sanctions by the United Nations Security Council. Iranian rulers have as little trust in the West as the West has in them, and they continue to increase international suspicion by their words and actions. Repeated statements by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad about Israel’s eventual disappearance play into the hands of those in Israel who argue that Iran’s nuclear program must be ended militarily.

Some of the Middle East’s most important players are increasing the risks of confrontation because they have either lost a proper feeling for their regional and international environment, or seek to increase their own political power through provocation and brinkmanship. Netanyahu’s short-sighted reluctance to give up settlements and occupied territory threatens Israel’s long-term interest to reach a fair settlement with the Palestinians. In its deadly assault on the Gaza flotilla in May, Netanyahu’s government demonstrated a kind of political autism in its inability to realize that even Israel’s best friends no longer wish to accept the humanitarian consequences of the Gaza blockade.

In the Arab world, there is currently no dominant power able to project stability beyond its own national borders. It will take time before Iraq plays a regional role again. The Saudi reform agenda mainly concerns domestic issues. Egypt’s political stagnation has reduced its regional influence. Qatar over-estimates its own strength.

The only regional power in the Middle East today is Iran, but it is not a stabilizing force. The Arab states are aware of this. Much as they dislike it, they are also fearful of a war between Israel or the United States and Iran, knowing that they would have little influence over events.

Indeed, intra-regional dynamics in the Middle East today are driven by three states, none of which is Arab: Israel, Iran, and, increasingly, Turkey. In recent years, Turkey tried to mediate between Israel and Syria, Israel and Hamas, opposing factions in Lebanon, and lately between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany.

Turkey should continue to play this role. But the Turkish government has increasingly allowed itself to be dragged into Middle East conflicts, rather than functioning as an honest broker.

The Obama administration has had a strong start with respect to the Middle East. But a year-and-a-half after his inauguration, Obama's "outstretched hand" to Iran has turned into a fist, and his attempts to encourage Israeli-Palestinian negotiations seem stuck. Domestic issues are likely to preoccupy Obama and his team at least up until the mid-term elections this November, thus precluding active diplomacy during the critical months ahead.

And the European Union? There has not been much active crisis-prevention diplomacy from Brussels or from Europe's national capitals. None of the leading EU states' foreign ministers seems even to have made an attempt to mediate between Europe's two closest Mediterranean partners, Israel and Turkey.

Twenty years ago, in the weeks that preceded Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, many observers saw signs of a looming crisis. But Arab and Western players somehow managed to convince themselves that things would not get out of hand.

That crisis, and others before and since, showed that tensions in the Middle East rarely dissolve with the passage of time. Sometimes they are resolved through active diplomatic intervention by regional or international players. And sometimes they are released violently.