Hopes and fantasies: The U.S., Israel and the war in Lebanon

It's possible that the terrorist group Hezbollah was deliberately inviting a sharp Israeli response when it decided in mid-July to cross from Lebanon into Israel, ambush an Israeli patrol and kidnap two Israeli soldiers. In any case, the Israelis' decision to launch land and air strikes on Hezbollah strongholds and on Lebanon's infrastructure has served to burnish Hezbollah's credentials.

Far from turning the Lebanese against the "Party of God"—which operates like a mini-state within Lebanon—Israel's military response, which has caused hundreds of civilian deaths, has served to bolster Hezbollah's self-appointed role as defender of the nation. In fact, it has made Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah a hero throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds and shaken the leaders of moderate Arab states.

Calls for a cease-fire will be in vain as long as the conflict serves the perceived self-interest of each side. Israel believes, understandably, that it must create a security zone in southern Lebanon; Hezbollah believes that it gains power simply by continuing to fight. A role for a United Nations peacekeeping force is possible only if there is first a peace to enforce, and that is not yet on the horizon.

Perhaps the only reason for hope is that the very gravity and explosiveness of the crisis, which could spread to Syria and Iran, might force a renewed search for a comprehensive settlement of issues in the region, including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Such a response would depend, however, on leadership not by the largely ineffectual UN but by the United States. And it would require the U.S. to engage the players in the region in a different way.

Because of its increasingly close identification with Israel, the U.S. has lost the ability and will to act as a third-party broker and thereby help manage conflicts. More detachment from Israel would actually put the U.S. in a better position to serve Israel's long-term interests.

The U.S. has also adopted an unproductive, moralizing approach to foreign policy. President Bush on July 31 called the Israel-Hezbollah war "part of the larger struggle between the forces of freedom and the forces of terror." That's a great political sound bite, and perhaps such presidential rhetoric is appropriate when one's own nation is involved in a straightforward military conflict like World War II. But it's dangerous to reduce the complexities of foreign affairs to polarized abstractions, especially when, as in this case, it ends up consigning most of the Arab world to the "forces of terror."

The Bush administration operates with the notion that, when confronted by military might, the "forces of terror" will collapse or see the light and come over to join the "forces of freedom." That may be how it happens in apocalyptic fantasies, but it's not how it happens in history. That is not what has happened in Iraq, and it is not what is happening in southern Lebanon.