

Time on the Middle East

By Edwin Madunagu

WHAT is there in a name? Sometimes there is much. Created by an American historian in 1902, the term Middle East, according to Ann Williams, "at first denoted a sphere of Western influence rather than a precise geographical or ethnic area". That is still what it is: a "sphere of Western influence". At its widest extent the Middle East is held to include the "region from Turkey and the Mediterranean seaboard lands (Lebanon, Syria, Israel) to Jordan, Iran, and Iraq in the east, and states of the Arabian peninsula in the South with Egypt and Sudan on the African continent".

Every major upsurge in the struggle of the Palestinian people – in Palestine and in Diaspora – reverberates throughout the Middle East especially in the segment bordering the state of Israel: Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt and in non-Arab states, such as Iran, that militantly support the Palestinians. In this piece, we look at the Middle East through the recent Israeli war on two non-state entities: Hamas (Palestine) and Hezbollah (Lebanon). Appropriate as a point of departure for this exercise is the cover story in the July 31, 2006 issue of *Time* newsmagazine titled: "The Way Out". The magazine called the situation in the Middle East a mess, and provided "six keys to peace" in the region. For convenience I shall call the *Time* editors "key providers".

The six "keys to peace in the Middle East" were captioned respectively: "Get the US involved"; "Don't forget the Palestinians"; "Guarantee Israel's security"; "Stabilise Lebanon"; "Handle Iran"; and "Pray for Iraq". We may leave the prayer and look at the first five "keys, one by one.

Get the US involved: The "key-providers" remind us that successive American governments, beginning with that of President Jimmy Carter, had tried to bring peace to the Middle East or minimally resolve the long conflict between the state of Israel and the dispossessed Palestinians – but so far, "those who have tried have had little to show for their pains". In

1979, President Jimmy Carter succeeded in "brokering" a peace between Egypt and Israel. But this successful effort "did nothing for Carter's political future", lamented the "key-providers". Five years after Carter's breakthrough in 1983, during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, 241 members of the US armed forces died after the bombing of a military barracks in Beirut, Lebanon. The "key-providers" said the American soldiers were killed by a "suspected Hezbollah faction".

President Bill Clinton left office in 2000 "bitterly disappointed that all his intelligence and charm were insufficient to bring about a comprehensive settlement between Israel and the Palestinians". We may join the key-providers to recall that Clinton had in 1993, hosted the "historic" accord between Israel and the Palestinians which led to the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) - Israeli bantustan - and the return of Yasser Arafat to Palestine and his assumption of the title "President Yasser Arafat".

Why then, did the current American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice embark on the latest "peace mission" to the volatile region? The key-providers believe that the American government is involved "not because it is the world's sole superpower, the policeman to which those in any tough neighbourhood eventually turn", but because "the US has a unique relationship with Israel and is committed to guaranteeing its security". Everyone knows this. But what is the content of this "uniqueness"? We may mention two mutually reinforcing elements.

An American Presidential candidate once described his country as a "nation of immigrants". Quite true, only that he failed to mention that those who were no immigrants – the original inhabitants – were wiped out by the early immigrants and that among the immigrants, some came as free

people in search of "greener pastures", while others arrived in chains and remained slaves for generations. To the American ruling bloc, the Jewish Americans constitute one of the most important and powerful segments of immigrants: politically, economically, scientifically, intellectually and militarily. A second aspect of the "unique relationship" consists of the fact that the state of Israel is a proxy for America in the Middle East. This rich source of energy must be guaranteed by the rulers of America supported by a proxy power in the region. And the power must remain dominant, and the only nuclear power in the Middle East.

In what way is the current American involvement a key to peace? According to the "key-providers", it is that "Washington can talk to the Israelis and occasionally, convince them that their best interests require them to talk to those whose motives and behaviour they despise". What else beyond this exhortation? American effort this time around, would be geared towards the construction of an "umbrella of Arab allies" to confront Hezbollah and Iran, their "sponsor". The "key-providers" quoted an unnamed American official as saying that Condoleezza Rice would not return from her Middle East "shuttle diplomacy" with a cease-fire, but with "stronger ties to the Arab world".

More explicitly, she said: "What we want is our Arab allies standing against Hezbollah and against Iran". And the strongest weapon to use in constructing this alliance is the division within Islam. The ruling groups in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan – which are the leading American allies in the region – are Sunni Moslems, while Hezbollah and its "sponsors" Iran, are Shiite Moslems! Rice believed that the prospects for the birth of the projected "umbrella of Arab allies" are bright. As she left for the

region in July, Rice said: "What we're seeing here in a sense, is the birth pangs of a new Middle East". Genocide as birth pangs.

Don't forget the Palestinians:

Why the Palestinians should not be forgotten according to the "key-providers", is not because there is injustice to be corrected, but because the "umbrella of Arab allies" will ask for a "full-hearted US commitment to revive the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians". The "allies believe that to cure the ills that have plagued the region, there must be "peace" between Israel and the Palestinians. There is also the "war against terrorism". British Prime Minister, Tony Blair was quoted to have told the American Congress in 2003: "Terrorism will not be defeated without peace in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine. Here it is that the poison is incubated". A third reason is that the "key-providers" are convinced that "in any deal with the Palestinians, Israel and its peoples will be safe".

Guarantee Israel's security:

Here the "key-providers" hit the nail on the head: "The Jewish state's super armed forces never failed when asked to fight against massed armies in conventional wars. But Israel is not fighting a standard war now; with Hamas and Hezbollah, it is battling against cells of well-trained militias energised by religious fervour". Furthermore, "armies surrender when their leaders tell them to; guerrillas just slip back to a safe house and wait to fight another day. Worse, today's irregular foes live in villages, hide in houses and are sheltered by civilians (or force civilians to shelter them)". What then should be done?

Dennis Ross, Middle East envoy for Presidents George H.W. Bush and Clinton opposed Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza. "The withdrawal", he said, "should not have taken place unless Palestinians were going to create the secu-

rity force to ensure security on their side, so that they were not attacked out of Gaza into Israel". On this premise, he advised that the next stage of the unilateral withdrawal strategy – the withdrawal from the West Bank – should be done on one of two conditions: "Either this withdrawal is geared only to Israeli settlers and not soldiers or the Palestinians are able to put together a credible security force". Since the state of Israel has not allowed the Palestinians to freely operate even a civil police force, it is clear that what Ross was proposing was a Palestinian state under the Israeli army.

Stabilise Lebanon: The key-providers' only concern here is Hezbollah. The armed organisation and others like it must be permanently prevented from firing rockets into Israel. There is no mention of age-long and genuine grievances emanating from Lebanon and Syria. There is again, a dilemma: "By leaving soldiers in the West Bank after withdrawal, Israel might hope to guarantee security on its eastern border. But the same tactic wouldn't work to the north; nobody is going to countenance Israel's occupying a swath of southern Lebanon again (as it did from 1982 to 2000) to deny Hezbollah room from which to fire its rockets – least of all Israelis themselves, who are horrified by the idea of a re-occupation". So, how would the Hezbollah be prevented from jumping in and out of Northern Israel? A permanent United Nations' armed presence or Hezbollah's forced dissolution. Neither is possible.

Handle Iran: The key here is the "facing down" of Iran. For, if this is not done, the country will try to destabilise oil states in the Gulf. But then, even if Iran is "faced down", and is forced to withdraw its support for Hamas and Hezbollah, "it is hardly certain that Hezbollah would follow suit. There is even less reason to think Hamas would". The "key-providers" are pessimistic about Hamas, a "Sunni organisation rooted in Palestinian resistance". The group, they say, "doesn't need Iran's encouragement to fight". True enough.