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Bolton's Middle East Mess

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After a brief hearing late last week, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee appears ready to approve the nomination of John R. Bolton, the Bush administration's ambassador to the United Nations and send it to the full Senate, where the existing Republican majority assures Bolton almost certain smooth sailing. Thus Bolton will become a permanent United States representative at the very moment that the Middle East is in upheaval as a result of the Israeli attack on Lebanon.

This is a bad time to confirm a nominee whose appointment was a mistake in the first place. The Middle Eastern crisis shows the problem clearly. The effects of the Israeli bombing of the Lebanese village of Qana last weekend—the destruction inflicted on civilian targets, and the deaths of women and children and the old and disabled—were so controversial they brought an end to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's shuttle diplomacy in the region. The secretary returned to Washington with the avowed purpose of crafting a resolution to be passed by the United Nations Security Council. Rice is hoping to present the resolution later this week, after which Bolton would be in charge of final negotiations and the voting.

But the United States is already isolated at the U.N., and Bolton is a notably unsympathetic figure. There is already outrage at the Israeli actions in Lebanon. The Qana bombing intensified demands for an immediate ceasefire, opposed by Bolton, who argued that a quick Security Council resolution contained "conclusionary language about the nature of the incident and language that attempted to foreshadow the political solution."

The bombing followed Israel's attacks on an outpost held by United Nations peacekeepers in southern Lebanon last week, which had already inflamed the situation. Bolton said nothing then, and his silence was stunning.

At his initial round of confirmation hearings a year ago, Bolton said his specific goals were to streamline and increase the effectiveness of the U.N., especially its peacekeeping operations. Yet when peacekeepers were physically attacked he had nothing to say about it. The attacks brought public condemnation from U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, disrupting a meeting in Rome where Rice sought to cobble together approval for the U.S. formula to help Israel out of the mess it has created.

Whatever one thinks of the favoritism displayed by U.S. policy, this situation is going to end in a U.N. Security Council action. The rules of that body require approval by nine of 15 nations who are members of the council, including all its permanent members—Great Britain, France, Russia and China in addition to the United States. John Bolton's acerbic manner and divisive tactics play against consensus at the Security Council. In just the past couple of months Bolton has failed to obtain council approval of U.S.-preferred resolutions on Iranian nuclear development and North Korean long-range missile testing.

The Bush vision for a Lebanon resolution promises to be even more openly one-sided. At his Capitol Hill appearance last week Bolton maintained that "any action we take must recognize that the current conflict is a direct result of the terrorist acts of Hezbollah and Hamas, and their state

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sponsors in Iran and Syria. We must defang Hezbollah. We hope that from this current crisis, we can seize the opportunity to once and forever dismantle Hezbollah.”

The connection between Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah can be expected to give both those powers an interest in avoiding the Bush plan for the situation in Israel. There are differences with France as well. Under the circumstances only deft diplomacy can bring Bush the bacon on Lebanon. There is no reason to suppose that Bolton, despite his claims to the contrary on Capitol Hill, is capable of such diplomacy.

Worse, President Bush's stalling on Lebanon, and Rice's lackadaisical mediation, to afford Israel maximum opportunity to achieve its aims on the ground have created a highly negative perception of the United States in the Middle East and elsewhere. Meanwhile, Bolton's predilection for extravagant and inflammatory rhetoric makes him absolutely the worst spokesman for the U.S. to have at an international forum like the United Nations at this time.

Bolton told the Senate last week that terrorism, not national or group goals, is the “root cause” of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict; that the United States has “no confidence” that Hezbollah would observe a cease-fire, indeed, that an immediate cease-fire would be a “stop gap” measure; and—here are shades of Iraq—that Iran's nuclear ambitions pose a “grave and direct threat” to international peace and security.

Bolton told the Security Council itself, when it was first considering a Lebanon cease-fire resolution on July 13, that the initiative was unbalanced, would “undermine the credibility of the Security Council,” and was “untimely” and outmoded. Instead, it is inaction that threatens U.N. credibility. Two weeks later, with the U.S. having stalled action, Annan felt obliged to tell the Security Council's members after the Qana bombing, “The authority and standing of this council are at stake.”

In short, with crisis in the Middle East, the need for Bush's representative at the United Nations to bargain in a real way to overcome U.S. isolation at the world body, and very negative perceptions of the American role, John R. Bolton is a disaster waiting to happen—or perhaps already in progress.