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Arab leaders' restraint rejected on the street

By Hugh Miles in Cairo

PRO-WESTERN Arab regimes have restrained themselves from laying all the blame for the crisis on Israel despite protests across the region showing where popular sympathies lie.

Jordan, Egypt and the Persian Gulf states risked domestic unpopularity by tempering censure of Israel with veiled criticism of Hizbollah.

King Abdullah of Jordan implicitly criticised the Lebanese militant group when he said that Jordan "stands against whoever exposes the Palestinian people and their cause, Lebanon and its sovereignty to unexpected dangers".

After a meeting between President Hosni Mubarak and King Abdullah in Cairo, they issued a joint statement about the danger of "the region being dragged into adventurism that does not serve Arab interests". Both Egypt and Jordan have diplomatic relations with Israel.

Such balanced messages are clearly out of step with the mood on the street. After last Friday's prayers, about 5,000 people demonstrated outside al-Azhar mosque in Cairo and 2,000 demonstrated in Amman, chanting: "Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan are one people."

The Saudi government promised yesterday to give \$70 million in emergency aid to Lebanon. Kuwait pledged \$20 million.

The leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has vigorously condemned Arab governments for taking a soft line on Israeli aggression.

A previously unknown Shia group in Saudi Arabia, the Hizbollah of Hijaz, strongly rejected government criticism of Hizbollah, calling it a "declaration of treason that does not reflect the will of our people". Shias make up about 10 per cent of the mainly Sunni Saudi population.

State-backed newspapers in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt have reiterated the government line that Hizbollah is guilty of "a miscalculation". But the independent and opposition press has been broadly supportive of the Lebanese militants.

Syria's foreign minister, Walid Moallem, defended Hizbollah at an emergency Arab summit convened on Friday. He demanded: "How can we come here to discuss the burning

situation in Lebanon while others are making statements criticising the resistance?"

The Arab League eventually managed to issue a final statement stressing unconditional support for Lebanon.

