



After the Lebanon War: *Quo Vadis* the Middle East?

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Theme: Lebanon has again been used as a convenient battleground for regional and global actors.

Summary: Lebanon is again at the centre of the Middle Eastern maelstrom. This is not the first time the Land of Cedars is used as a convenient battleground for regional and global actors.

There are several factors to explain the current situation: (1) the internal situation in Lebanon following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri; (2) the emergence of Iran as a major player in the Middle East following the war in Iraq; (3) the role of Syria, that has never accepted its forced ousting from Lebanon in the spring of 2005; (4) Israel's concern with the Palestinian situation; and (5) the US Administration's inability to win the 'global war on terror' and the uncontrollable situation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The war in the summer of 2006 between Hezbollah and the Israel Defence Forces is a harbinger of the new realities emerging in the Middle East.

Analysis: Since the end of the civil war in Lebanon (1975-89), the country has gone through a period of amazing reconstruction shepherded by the late Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri. Thanks to his contacts and global friendships, Hariri brought back to Lebanon a respect it had lost and a role it used to have. The major drawback, though, was that Hariri focused on the rebuilding of stones at the expense of reconciliation between the Lebanese.

In fact, reconciliation between Lebanon's various communities never really occurred. The Christians especially came out feeling defeated and betrayed, while the Sunnis and the Shiites came out with more control over the levers of power. Unlike South Africa and some Latin American countries, there has never been a truth and reconciliation commission created to 'police the past' in Lebanon.

The other major fault line in this Lebanese scenario is Hezbollah's (Party of God) ever-growing role and influence on the Lebanese scene. Created after the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah became a major linchpin of the resistance against the occupation. The party's leadership succeeded, thanks to Syria and Iran's help, in creating a large network of institutions to answer the various social and humanitarian needs of the

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population of the southern Lebanon. Hezbollah became the paramount military and social power in the south of the country, which is mostly dominated by Lebanese Shiites. Calls to send Lebanese troops to the border with Israel were always faced with resistance. The Lebanese President Emile Lahoud (Syria's major ally in Lebanon) has always argued that sending Lebanese troops to the border would be tantamount to acting as defenders of Israeli security. The war between Israel and Hezbollah in the summer of 2006 demonstrates how wrong this reasoning was. This is why after almost a month since the beginning of the Israeli campaign the Lebanese government has offered to send 15,000 troops to the border; an unviable option at this stage given Israel's refusal to withdraw unless replaced by a strong international force. Then there is the question of Hezbollah and its weapons and how to integrate its militia in the Lebanese Army, a tall order for a weak and dismembered country.

Following the assassination of Rafiq al Hariri in February 2005, UN Security Council resolution 1559 called for the exit of all foreign troops from Lebanon (in this case meaning Syria) and the dismantling of Hezbollah as a militia. The rationale was that Israel had ended its occupation of the southern Lebanon and the Hezbollah's resistance movement had become pointless; but this was not Hezbollah's interpretation. For the Shia-dominated militia Israel was still in occupation of the Shebaa Farms (an area of around 20-25 square kilometres in the southern Lebanon) and this justified maintaining its weaponry.

Because of the weakness of the Lebanese central government, the country had become a favoured ground for armed groups to create states within a state. This was the case of the PLO for at least 25 years until Arafat and his men were forced out of Beirut in the mid 1980s and subsequently of. Then a home-grown variety –but supported by Iran and Syria– appeared: Hezbollah.

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, regional politics in the Middle East have changed. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini wanted to export his brand of fundamentalist Islam throughout the Middle East and the Muslim world. Lebanon, with its large Shiite community, became a favoured target of Teheran's entreaties. Following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Iranian regime took advantage of the mistakes committed by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) to consolidate its influence in the country.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 consolidated Iran as a major player in the region. The 'Shiite arc of influence' now extended all the way from Teheran to Basrah and to Beirut. The Iranian regime took advantage of the fragmentation of Iraq to extend its influence and presence in southern Iraq.

Teheran is now waiting to see how the Bush Administration will play its cards (both as regards Iraq and the Iranian nuclear weapons programme) to determine its behaviour in Iraq and the Middle East. Hezbollah is a convenient instrument for Iran's disruptive policies against US interests in the region.

Another major player is Syria. The Syrian regime has never formally acknowledged Lebanon as a sovereign entity. An instance of this is the absence of embassies between Syria and Lebanon. In 1976, with US and Israeli support, President Hafez al Assad of Syria sent his troops to Lebanon to maintain a state of controlled tension. The Syrians played willing Lebanese factions against each other to maintain their supremacy. With Washington's tacit support Syria's suzerainty over Lebanon lasted for thirty years.

Syria's pre-eminent role in Lebanon was challenged by the late Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri. Hariri, who had never had a viable relationship with Emile Lahoud, the Syrian-appointed President of Lebanon, was incensed by Syria's decision to renew Lahoud's presidential mandate in an entirely unconstitutional move. To reverse this, Hariri lobbied hard with his European and American friends to have the UN adopt a resolution calling for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and for the disarming of Hezbollah.

In the spring of 2005, following Hariri's assassination, Syria was forced to pull out its troops from Lebanon. Moreover, the Syrian regime is now facing the prospect of an international tribunal to investigate the assassinations that took place in Lebanon since Hariri's death, including of course his own killing.

Since Ariel Sharon came to power in Israel and throughout his term of office, the Palestinian issue became a primary concern, especially the demographic dimension of the conflict. Sharon decided to build a wall (or 'separation fence' in Israel's official terminology) around most of the West Bank, creating a new element on the ground. He also decided to undercut Hamas's regional connections. Since the beginning of the Second Intifada (September 2000), pro Syrian and Iranian groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah had forged a close political and military alliance. The victory of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006 had forced the Israelis to try to rid themselves of Hamas and undermine its legitimacy as a democratically elected force in Palestine. There is now the prospect of weak leaders trying to find an impossible compromise: Ehud Olmert in Israel, Muhammad Abbas in Palestine and Fouad Siniora in Lebanon.

Israel's military decision to beat Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank and Hezbollah in Lebanon falls within the objectives stated by the Bush Administration in its 'global war on terror'. However, the war effort today seems to have been weakened by the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the break-up of Iraq because of the raging insurgency in Baghdad and the southern part of the country.

The Bush Administration's objectives of combating terrorism and bringing democracy to the Middle East are in a shambles. Sensing a possible US decision to whittle down its military presence in Iraq and given Iran's rising influence in the region, Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert decided to hit Lebanon. The joint US-Israeli vision is to create a 'New Middle East' which not only sounds like an oxymoron, but is a dangerous one at that.

In Arab intellectual circles there is speculation that this new/old policy is very similar to the ideas attributed to some Israeli and American circles of dividing the Arab Middle East along ethnic and sectarian lines: a Shiite state in southern Iraq; a Kurdish state in northern Iraq; a Sunni rump state protected by Egypt and Saudi Arabia; Alawi, Sunni and Druze entities in Syria; and, lastly, the partition of Lebanon into Christian, Sunni, Shiite and Druze enclaves. The purpose of this balkanisation –according to these circles– is to ensure Israel's hegemony as a Jewish state in a confessionally fragmented region. Certainly, this is a recipe for disaster and would portend never-ending wars and terrorism in the Middle East and around the world.

The war in the summer of 2006 between Hezbollah and the Israel Defence Forces is a harbinger of the new realities emerging in the Middle East. First, the war in Lebanon is the longest confrontation between the Israeli army and an irregular militia. Usually wars between regular Arab and Israeli armies lasted between one to two weeks. Whatever the outcome of this summer's war, Hezbollah has emerged as a major player in future Lebanese and regional politics.

Secondly, by using Hezbollah as its regional instrument, Iran has emerged as a major power, especially as a protector of the Shiites in the Middle East. Moreover, Iran will be an inevitable interlocutor for the US and Britain regarding the future of Iraq. Regardless of whether Iraq descends into a civil war or not, Iran is a major player to contend with.

Thirdly, the old regional Arab order controlled by Sunni-dominated countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan is dying. Saudi Arabia has lost its leverage especially since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (most of the attackers were Saudis). Egypt is in a transition that could destabilise the country. Hezbollah's 'victory' in Lebanon is a major boost for the political fortunes of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan and Hamas in Palestine. Jordan is reaping the consequences of the wars in Iraq, Palestine and now Lebanon. The Hashemite monarchy's prospects will be determined by regional instability and global intervention.

Finally, Europe and the West will have to undergo a major paradigm shift. The West's Arab interlocutors have changed. Those in the Middle East who wanted to bring democracy and liberalisation to the region have been defeated by the war in Lebanon. The West will have to learn to talk and accept a more radical Islamist vision of the region. However unsavoury such an option is, the West will have to adopt a different approach to the region. This applies especially to the Bush Administration, whose Manichaean view of the world is a mirror image of the Islamists perception of relations with the US.

Winners and Losers of the Summer 2006 Israel-Hezbollah Confrontation

The confrontation ended with the adoption on 11 August by the UN Security Council of Resolution 1701. In it the international community set out the principles of a lasting solution to the crisis. The Resolution calls for a 'full cessation of hostilities' between Hezbollah and Israel and reiterates the international community's 'strong support for full respect of the Blue Line' (separating Israel and Lebanon). It also calls for the 'full implementation of the relevant provisions of the Taif Accords' (which ended the Lebanese civil war in 1989) and 'the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon'. Resolution 1701 also involves the release of both the abducted Israeli soldiers and of Lebanese prisoners and the delineation of the borders –especially in the disputed Shebaa Farms area–. Finally, it calls for the deployment of a maximum of 15,000 troops to be added to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). As of the time of writing, France and Italy have agreed to provide half of this number.

So far, the biggest losers of the conflict are the Israeli government, the Lebanese people (with an initial assessment of the direct costs of the war amounting to US\$2.5 billion), the Bush Administration's 'global war on terror' and the US campaign to promote democracy in the Middle East.

According to many US, European and Middle Eastern observers the main winner is Hezbollah's Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, who has become a hero in the eyes of the Arab world by managing to confront the most powerful army in the Middle East for more than four weeks. Certainly, this has come at a large cost in life and property. The downside of Hezbollah's 'victory' is the options it has ahead: remaining Iran's instrument in Lebanon or accepting to be part and parcel of the reconstructed Lebanese state. According to Lebanese sources, Hezbollah is set to cooperate with the Lebanese Army's deployment in the south of the country, although the Shiite group refuses to disarm as long as there Israeli soldiers remain on Lebanese soil.

The summer war is a major wake-up call to the Israeli government and army, as it has been the first major war between a highly-sophisticated regular army and a guerrilla movement known for resorting to terrorism from its inception.

What is clear is that Ehud Olmert's policy of unilateral disengagement from Gaza and the West Bank has received a major blow and lost its credibility for Israeli public opinion. The upshot is that the settlers in the West Bank have gained the upper hand. Their voice and concerns will be represented by Olmert's leading opponent, Benjamin Netanyahu. A change in the Israeli government should not be ruled out. The same applies to the strategies and tactics of the Israeli Defence Forces. In summary, Israel will not accept the current status quo and will do its best to deal a major blow against its bitter Shiite enemy in Lebanon.

As far as the Bush Administration is concerned, the Lebanese fiasco has been added to the current prospect of civil war in Iraq and to the unstable situation in Afghanistan. Last but not least, the US campaign to spread democracy in the Middle East has received a major setback.

Conclusions

Where Do We Go from Here?

Lebanon will have to be rebuilt once again. An ironclad guarantee will have to be put in place so that its southern borders are never again used as a launching pad against Israel. This requires the insertion of a large-scale international peacekeeping force or the expansion of the current UNIFIL mandate, placing it under UN Charter Chapter VII.

A new realignment in the region will depend on the outcome of the current conflict. If Iran succeeds in maintaining its influence both in Iraq and Lebanon, it will do its utmost to maintain its nuclear weapons programme. These factors (the Shiites in Iraq and Lebanon and the nuclear programme) will be Iran's trump card for a possible negotiation with the US.

A possible redrawing of regional influence might allow Iran a right of suzerainty over Iraq, especially over its Shia-dominated regions. Israel might then be allowed to maintain its control over what is left of the West Bank. Egypt and Jordan could be brought in somehow to participate in this condominium.

The regime in Syria is likely to survive, but with its wings clipped and only an indirect influence on Lebanon. The US and France will still have a say in Lebanon's future, but everything hinges on the outcome of the presidential changes in the US and France. The Syrian leadership is anxiously awaiting the results in September of the UN Commission investigating the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri.

The implications for the US and the 'global war on terror' are that there will now be more recruits available to al-Qaeda and its satellites, especially following the disasters in Lebanon and Iraq. This is why it will be of the utmost urgency for the US and the world community to end the current Israeli-Hezbollah war in Lebanon and to get on with reconstruction. Lebanon urgently needs a strong central government with a well-trained army. The challenge is how to create a lasting solution that satisfies all the parties involved. Regional settlements will have a decisive impact on Lebanon's future stability. The US will have a major say in the matter, but it will have to accommodate regional interests (ie, those of Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan).

There is an urgent need to find a lasting solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conundrum. Any delay will unleash the forces of destabilisation in Jordan, a regional ally the US cannot afford to lose.

Finally, there is an urgent need to establish something similar to the Helsinki process (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, CSCE) to monitor violations of human rights in the Middle East, and especially to establish an arms control mechanism. This is an urgent task because the next confrontation could be fought with tactical nuclear weapons, a scary prospect when combined with fear, mistrust and religious fanaticism in the Middle East.

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