

In the Eye of the Storm: The Summer 2006 War in Lebanon

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Together with Iraq and the situation in Palestine, Lebanon represented another factor of instability in the Eastern Mediterranean. 2006 was a year that saw the Land of Cedars again at the centre of the Middle Eastern maelstrom. It is not the first time this small Mediterranean country is used as a convenient battleground by regional and global actors.

Background to the 2006 Lebanon War

There are several factors to explain the events that led to the summer 2006 war between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Hezbollah (Party of God): the internal situation in Lebanon following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri; the emergence of Iran as a major player in the Middle East following the US war in Iraq; the role of Syria, that has never accepted its forced ousting from Lebanon in the spring of 2005; Israel's concern with the Palestinian reality; and the US administration inability to implement the *global war on terror* and the uncontrollable situation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since the end of the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1989) the country has gone through a period of amazing reconstruction shepherded by the late Prime Minister Rafiq 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 among Lebanese people.

In fact reconciliation between Lebanon's various com-

munities did not really take place. The Christians especially came out feeling defeated and betrayed while the Sunnis and the Shias came out with more control of power levers in Lebanon. 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 ever growing role and influence on the Lebanese scene. Created following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah became a major linchpin of the resistance against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. The party's leadership succeeded, thanks to Syria and Iran's help, in creating a large network of institutions to meet the various social and humanitarian needs of the population of South Lebanon. Hezbollah became the paramount military and social power in South Lebanon, mostly dominated by Lebanese Shias. Calls to send Lebanese troops to the border with Israel were always faced with resistance. Lebanon's 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 summer 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah demonstrates how wrong this reasoning was. This is why, almost one month after the beginning of the Israeli campaign, Lebanon's government offered to send 15,000 Lebanese army troops to the border. A non-viable option at this stage, given Israel's refusal to withdraw unless replaced by a strong international force. Then we have the question of Hezbollah and its weapons and how to integrate this militia into the Lebanese Army, a tall order for a weak and dismembered country.

Following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri (February 2005), UN Security Council Resolution 1559 was adopted calling for the withdrawal of all foreign troops

from Lebanon (in this case meaning Syria) and the dismantling of Hezbollah as a militia, the rationale being that Israel had ended its occupation of South Lebanon and the Hezbollah resistance movement had become moot. 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 kilometres in South Lebanon), which justified maintaining its weapons.

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Because of the weakness of the central government in Lebanon, the country had become rife ground for armed groups to create a state within a state. This was the case of the PLO in Lebanon for at least 25 years until Arafat and his men were forced out of Beirut in the mid 1980s. Then we had a Lebanese brand supported by Iran and Syria: Hezbollah.

Iran and Syria: Regional Spoilers?

Since the advent of 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 Shia community became a favourite target of Teheran entreaties. Following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Iranian regime took advantage of the mistakes committed by the IDF to consolidate its influence in the Land of Cedars.

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

Teheran is waiting to see how the Bush administration will play its cards (both with the issue of Iraq and the Iranian nuclear weapons program) 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 country. Proof has always been 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 tensions. The Syrians played willing Lebanese factions against one another to maintain its supremacy. With Washington's tacit support, Syrian suzerainty over Lebanon lasted for thirty years.

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

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

Israel in the Lebanese Quagmire: "Plus Ça Change..."

After the advent of Ariel Sharon to power in Israel and throughout his period in power the Palestinian issue became a foremost concern, especially the demographic dimension of the conflict. Sharon decided then to build a wall (or "separation fence" in official Israeli description) around most of the West Bank, creating a new fact on site. He also decided to undercut Hamas' regional connections. Since the beginning of the Second Intifada (2001), pro Syrian and Iranian groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah had forged a close political and military alliance. The victory of Hamas early in 2006 in the Palestinian legislative elections forced the Israelis to get rid of Hamas and undermine its legitimacy as a democratically elected force in Palestine. We have the prospect of weak leaders trying to reach an unreachable compromise: Ehud Olmert in Israel, Muhammad Abbas in Palestine, and Fuad Siniora in Lebanon. This is not a good prescription for a lasting peace in the Eastern Mediterranean. Israel's military decision to strike out against 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 terrorism*. This war was weakened by the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the break-up of Iraq because of the rampant civil war going on in Baghdad and the Southern part of the country.

The US, Europe and America's Arabs

The Bush administration objectives to fight terrorism and bring democracy to the Middle East lay in shambles. Sensing a possible US decision to whittle its military presence in Iraq and given Iran's rising influence in the region, Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert decided to strike Lebanon. The joint US-Israeli vision was to impose a *New Middle East Order* that sounds more like an oxymoron, and a dangerous one at that. In Arab intellectual circles there was speculation that this new old policy is very similar to ideas attributed to some Israeli and American circles to divide the Arab Middle East along ethnic and sectarian lines: a Shia 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, Shia and Druze enclaves. The purpose of this balkanization – according to these circles – is to ensure Israel's hegemony as a Jewish state in a confessionally fragmented region. Certainly, this is a prescription for disaster and will foster never ending wars and terrorism in the Middle East and around the world.

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The summer 2006 war between Hezbollah and the IDF was a harbinger of the new situations emerging in the Middle East. First, the war in Lebanon was the longest confrontation between the Israeli army and an irregular militia. Usually wars between regular Arab and Israeli armies last between one to two weeks. As a result of the summer 2006 war, Hezbollah has emerged as a major player in future Lebanese and regional politics.

Second, by using Hezbollah as its regional instrument, Iran has emerged as a major power, and especially as a protector of the Shias in the Middle East. More-

over, Iran will be an inevitable interlocutor for the US and Britain regarding the future of Iraq. Regardless of whether Iraq breaks out in civil war or not, Iran is a major player to contend with.

Third, the old regional Arab order controlled by Sunni-dominated countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan was on the wane. Saudi Arabia has lost its leverage, especially since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (most of the attackers were Saudis). In 2006, Egypt was also in a transition that could be a destabilizing factor in the country. Hezbollah's victory in Lebanon was a major boost for the political fortunes of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan and Hamas in Palestine. Jordan reaped the consequences of the wars in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon. Prospects for the Hashemite monarchy will be determined by regional instability and global intervention.

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Lastly, Europe and the West have had to undergo a major paradigm shift. The West's Arab interlocutors have changed. Those in the Middle East who wanted to bring democracy and liberalization to the region have been defeated by the war in Lebanon. The West will have to learn to talk and accept an Islamist, more radical vision of the region. However unsavoury such an option is, the West will have to adopt a different approach to the Middle East. This applies especially to the Bush administration, whose Manichean 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 War

The confrontation ended with the adoption by the UN Security Council (August 11) of Resolution 1701. In it, the international community set out the principles of a lasting solution to the crisis. UN Security Council Resolution 1701 called for a "full cessation of hostilities" between Hezbollah and Israel and reiterated the international community's "strong support for full respect of the Blue Line (separating Israel and Lebanon)". It also called for the "full implemen-

tation of the relevant provisions of the Taif Agreement (1989) – that ended the Lebanese civil war – and the disarmament “of all armed groups in Lebanon.” Resolution 1701 also involved the release of the abducted Israeli soldiers and the Lebanese prisoners and the delineation of the borders, especially in the Shebaa Farms area. Finally, UN Resolution 1701 called for the deployment of 15,000 troops to be added to the UNIFIL contingent in South Lebanon. France, Spain and Italy provided half of this number.

The biggest losers of the Summer 2006 conflict, the longest Arab-Israeli war, included the Israeli government, the Lebanese people (initial assessment of the direct costs of the war amounted to 2,464 billion dollars), the Bush Administration’s Global War on Terror (GWOT) and the US campaign to promote democracy in the Middle East.

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For many US, European and Middle Eastern observers, the major winner was Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. Nasrallah became a major hero in the Arab world by succeeding in confronting the most potent army in the Middle East for more than four weeks. Certainly, this has come at a major cost in life and property. The downside of Nasrallah’s victory was the kind of options Hezbollah will adopt: being Iran’s long arm in Lebanon or accepting to be part and parcel of the reconstructed Lebanese state. According to Lebanese sources Hezbollah collaborated with the deployment of the Lebanese Army in the South and still respects the presence of UNIFIL II. The Shia group stated that it would refuse to disarm as long as there were still Israeli soldiers on Lebanese soil.

The summer 2006 war was a major wake up call to the Israeli government and army. This was the first major war between a regular highly sophisticated army and a guerrilla movement known for its recourse to terrorism in its inception.

What became clear was that Ehud Olmert’s policy of unilateral disengagement from Gaza and the West Bank had received a major blow and lost its credibility in Israeli public opinion. The upshot was that the settlers in the West Bank have gained the upper hand.

Their voice and concerns will probably be carried by Olmert’s major opponent Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu. A change in the Israeli government was not to be excluded. The same applied to the tactics and war strategies of the IDF. In summation, Israel will not accept the current status quo and in 2007 will do its best to mete out a major defeat against its bitter Shia enemy in Lebanon.

As far as the Bush administration was concerned the Lebanese fiasco has been added to the rampant civil war in Iraq and the unstable situation in Afghanistan. Last but not least, and as a result of the summer 2006 war in Lebanon, the US campaign to spread democracy in the Middle East received a major setback.

After the Lebanon War: Trends and Outlooks

Lebanon will have to be rebuilt once again. An iron-clad guarantee will have to be put in place that its southern borders will never be used as a launching pad against Israel. This means the introduction of a major international peacekeeping force or expanding the current UN troops (UNIFIL) mandate, placing it under UN Charter Chapter VII.

The 2006 war led to a new realignment in the region. Iran succeeded in maintaining its influence both in Iraq and Lebanon; it will do its utmost to maintain its nuclear weapons program. These factors (Shias in Iraq and Lebanon and nuclear program) will be Iran’s trump card for possible negotiation or confrontation with the US.

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There may be a possible redrawing of regional influence, with Iran being allowed a right of suzerainty over Iraq, especially of its Shia-dominated region. Israel would be allowed to maintain its control of what is left of the West Bank. Egypt and Jordan could be brought in somehow to participate in this condominium. The regime in Syria will survive, but with clipped

wings and some kind of an indirect influence in Lebanon. The US and France will still have a say in Lebanon's future, but this all hinges on the outcome of presidential changes in the US and France (Bush administration and Jacques Chirac). The Syrian leadership is still anxiously awaiting the results of the UN Commission investigating the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the creation of a special tribunal.

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The implications for the US and the *global war on terrorism* were that there will be more recruits available to Al Qaeda and its cohorts, especially following the disasters in Lebanon and Iraq. This is why it was of utmost urgency for the US and the world community to end the Israeli-Hezbollah war in Lebanon and help the country get on with reconstruction. Lebanon urgently needs a strong central government with a well-trained army. The big challenge is how to create a lasting solution that would satisfy all factions. Regional settlements will heavily impact Lebanon's future and regional stability. The US has a major say in that, but will have to accommodate regional interests (Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt and Jordan). The Lebanese still have to reach a final agreement on

the three following basic issues: the viability of the Taif Agreement and whether it is still applicable in the current situation, especially in light of the changes brought about by the 2006 Israeli war against Hezbollah; the role Lebanon should play in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and whether Lebanon should implement war or peace economic policies.

In early 2007 what are the prospects for the small Mediterranean country? Stability or civil war? The jury is still out for Lebanon. There is going to be a period of instability until a new President is elected next October. As a playground for regional and global tensions, Lebanon will have to await the outcome of the following events: results of the current Iranian-Saudi talks; Syria's struggle to get out of its isolation and the role Damascus will play as a spoiler in Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine; a stronger Israeli leadership; and the results of the current debate in the US on what course to follow with the Iranian regime: diplomacy or military action.

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