

The War in Lebanon and the Situation in the Middle East

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The consequences of last summer's devastating war in Lebanon and the north of Israel did not only affect the parties in conflict but also their neighbouring countries and, in general, the entire region of the Middle East. The conflict led to an entrenchment in more radical postures, which played in detriment of the more moderate sectors both on the Arab and on the Israeli sides. However, in view of the armed conflict, the international community reaffirmed its conviction that only a negotiated solution can resolve the conflicts in this region. As a token of their commitment to stability in Lebanon, northern Israel and the region as a whole, Europe and its member states have become increasingly involved in reviving the Middle East Peace Process.

The Armed Conflict

On 12th July 2006, members of the Hezbollah militia struck two combat cars of the Israeli armed forces killing three soldiers and leaving three wounded. They also kidnapped two soldiers: Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev. Some hours later, the Israeli army launched a raid in an attempt to rescue the captured soldiers, but

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met fierce resistance by Hezbollah militia men who killed five soldiers and destroyed a Merkava combat car. In view of this situation, the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert decided an attack on Lebanon initiating a war that lasted 33 days.

It is worth analyzing, if only briefly, the decision of the Israeli government as one that will have a definitive impact on the future developments of the conflict. Traditionally, Lebanon's southern border – one of the most heavily guarded by Israel – was a zone of relative calm with sporadic episodes of violent incidents limited to the border area. This strike-and-respond dynamic was kept within certain limits that minimized the range of the attacks and the subsequent reprisals. According to Israel, Hezbollah was and continues to be a terrorist organization that until last August stopped the Lebanese State from asserting authority in the southern zone of the country and used the territories south of the river Litani as a ground for launching attacks on the territory of Israel and its population. Until last summer, Israel's response to the attacks by Hezbollah was guided by this principle and it regarded the organization as a separate entity from the Lebanese State and its institutions.

But on the night of 12th July Israel radically shifted focus on this issue and began to consider that the attacks were launched by the Lebanese State and not by a terrorist organization. This change of approach would bear consequences on the range and duration of the war. Thus, instead of targeting Hezbollah-occupied positions, the first Israeli air raids were aimed at the Beirut airport and the main roads of the country.

It is not clear why the Israeli government chose to undertake an open war rather than resorting to limited retaliation in some areas in the south of Lebanon and concentrating on Hezbollah targets as it had done in the past. The reason behind the Israeli decision could be that they were convinced that by inflicting sufficient

harm to Lebanon, the Lebanese people themselves would confront Hezbollah and put an end to the looming threat of their presence in southern Lebanon. This strategy was doomed to failure from the very beginning, and as events unfolded, it also inspired political and military action almost simultaneously undertaken by Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip that proved to be equally wrong. The Lebanese did not react to the bombings in the way Israeli authorities had expected. On the contrary, following the Israeli military action Lebanese civilians and the Arab public opinion at large rallied against the policy of Israel and showed support for the defence of the Lebanese territory led by Hezbollah. Additionally, there was yet another element that most surely played a determining role in Israel's decision: its conviction that the time had arrived to defeat Hezbollah militarily, thus sending a clear message that it would not consent to any further political and military interference from Iran in the region.

In any case, the Israeli government publicly defined its military objectives from the outset: the release of their kidnapped soldiers; defeating, and as far as possible, destroying the Hezbollah movement and their commanders; and, lastly, dissipating any threats to Israeli security directed from the Lebanese territory. However, none of these objectives were achieved by the use of military force after 33 days of war. Unlike the military action, diplomacy provided a way out of the conflict as far as it provided peaceful means to settle differences. UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) favoured the end of hostilities, the reinforcement of UNIFIL, and allowed the Lebanese government and armed forces to assert their authority south of the river Litani. At least indirectly, the Resolution satisfied the wish of Israeli authorities to do away with security threats in the north of Israel.

The End of the Conflict

Three weeks into the conflict it became evident that Israel would not achieve any of its objectives and that a military victory would only be possible at a high toll that none of the parties was willing to pay. When they became convinced that an extended conflict was no longer useful, US authorities decided to accept a diplomatic solution that was being forged with great difficulty by the United Nations Security Council. On 11th August 2006 the Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 1701 (2006) and

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ceasefire came into effect on 14th August.

Resolution 1701 (2006) favoured the suspension of all military actions, the deployment of Lebanese armed forces in the south of the country and the extension of authority of the Beirut Government over its entire territory. Moreover, the Resolution urged the Lebanese Government to "secure its borders and other entry points to prevent the entry, without its consent, of arms or related material." At the same time the Security Council called upon Israel and Lebanon to find a bilateral solution to the conflict on the basis of the following elements: full respect for the Blue Line; the security arrangements between both countries; full implementation of the relevant provisions of the Taif Accords and of Security Resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1680 (2006); and no foreign forces or supply of arms to Lebanon without the consent of its government. Lastly, Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) authorized UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) to increase its troop strength to a maximum of 15,000. From an Israeli perspective, Resolution 1701 (2006) entails the disarmament of Hezbollah and the imposition of an arms embargo. At the same time, the presence of Lebanese troops south of the River Litani should help put an end to Hezbollah's control of southern Lebanon. These measures reduce – or at least diminish significantly – the risk of violent actions directed to the north of Israel. Likewise, this Resolution allows Israel to claim that the objectives stated at the beginning of the hostilities have been achieved, at least partially.

For the Lebanese government, the Resolution adopted on 11th August signified in the first place the cessation of all the hostilities that had taken a serious toll in material and human terms. But the adoption and implementation of this Resolution further enabled the extension of the Government's authority and institutions throughout Lebanon, particularly by being present south of the River Litani. Hence, the end of the war contributed to strengthening the Lebanese State in a formal way, in the face of the power and

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For Hezbollah and its leaders, however, the adoption of Resolution 1701 (2006) provided a way out of a conflict that they would have never been able to win by force, but which made them appear victorious because their militia were not defeated. Even though the Resolution establishes - at least on paper - that Hezbollah must transfer control of a large number of zones in Lebanon, it also provides an opportunity for the Party of God to direct its popularity and influence through relevant political channels that would allow Hezbollah leaders to actively take part in the political life of the country while giving up their military force.

Was a one-month war really necessary to reach this compromise? Surely not. Already in the first week it became evident that a military solution was impossible and that the situation required a diplomatic solution. From the beginning, the Spanish Government held - in agreement with various European partners -, that the problems in the region would not be resolved unilaterally by resorting to military force. Early into the crisis and despite resistance from Israel's Prime Minister Olmert and some of his cabinet members, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni made efforts to find a solution to the conflict by way of diplomacy in order to stop the increasing number of victims and the huge devastation inflicted on both sides of the border. But the determination of some Israeli leaders to eliminate Hezbollah and to indirectly inflict a heavy blow on Iran prevailed over any appeal for common sense and moderation.

The Effects of the Conflict

Israel

For Israel this war resulted in a political and military fiasco. None of the objectives were achieved and the price paid for this military adventure was ex-

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ceedingly high. Not surprisingly, the great majority of the Israeli population currently feels frustrated and ultimately regards this war as a lost war. The ceasefire did not result in a stronger and safer country, but rather, in one that lives in fear and is internally divided with regards to the policy to be followed in order to ensure the survival of the Israeli State.

Following the armed conflict, weaknesses in both the government and the armed forces have emerged as they received heavy criticism for the military and political decisions taken during the war. For the first time in its history, the Israeli armed forces lost credibility and prestige, their capacity and potential to ensure the survival of the Israeli State being put into question. For its part, the Israeli Government and the Prime Minister's party, the Kadima, lost sight of their main political plan which envisaged unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank. Following last summer's events, it became evident that a unilateral withdrawal from the occupied territories does not guarantee peace and security. Devoid of a political program and with low popularity rates, the government coalition is now faced with the dilemma of either continuing with the occupation and settlement policy in the territories or proceeding to negotiations.

Lebanon

The outcome of this war is tragic for Lebanon. It will take years of reconstruction work to repair the huge destruction caused by 33 days of war. Over the period of one month the country lost most of what it had achieved since the end of its civil war.

Initially, Hezbollah appeared to gather strength out of this conflict. Its prestige in the Arab world increased dramatically. For the man in the street, Hezbollah had restored the Arab people's honour and dignity by confronting the powerful war machinery of Israel to some degree of success. But as weeks went by, the division within the March 14 movement became evident (Hariri, Jumblat and Siniora along with Gega

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and Gemayel's Christian groups); this division was also evident in the main opposition groups such as Hezbollah, Amal and General Aoun's group. Since the end of the war, Hezbollah tried to take political advantage of its prestige by demanding more power for the Lebanese Shiite community and aiming at forming a powerful minority group within the Lebanese government. However, the majority groups in government led by Primer Minister Siniora do not appear to be in favour of changing the system of power quotas, in place since Lebanon's independence, and which was only slightly modified by the 1989 Taif Accords.

Lebanon is faced with a serious institutional crisis that is dividing the country in two, and for which no easy solution is envisaged. A pacific solution to this situation can only be found nationally by way of dialogue and agreement. There is yet another factor to consider along with the high complexity of Lebanese society and politics: the external dimension of the Lebanese crisis. While the opposition receives support from Syria and Iran, the government of Prime Minister Siniora is backed by Western countries (especially the US and France) and some moderate Arab states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This external aspect poses great difficulties in the way of finding a solution to the crisis, since it introduces conditions that are not strictly relevant to the current internal debate between the government and the opposition, but are rather instrumental to the conflict involving such countries. Some of the main points of disagreement, such as the designation of an international tribunal to judge those responsible for the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and for other political crimes seem to be more relevant in this external dimension rather than internally.

The Arab Countries

When the war broke out moderate Arab states were faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, they con-

demned the Israeli aggression and expressed the Arab world's solidarity with Lebanon. But on the other hand, their governments did not disapprove of Israel's military lesson to Hezbollah and to Iran in addition. The governments of Egypt and Jordan have always disapproved of Hezbollah's aggressiveness and militant Islamism and they fear the consequences of their influence over the Islamic parties of their own countries if they were to gain a victory. On the contrary, a defeat of the Party of God may have a positive influence on the conflict they have with the Muslim Brotherhood. Likewise, a defeat would have put an end to the influence and power of Iran in the region, thus restricting its role as a "regional power" in the Middle East.

This dilemma was present over the first days of the war, and it explains why the reaction of moderate Arab states to "Israel's aggression" was sober. However, Hezbollah's resistance, the growing number of civil victims and the material damage inflicted on Lebanon made it increasingly difficult to maintain this posture. In some Arab capitals there were signs that governments were becoming estranged from what was felt in the "Arab streets." As the days went by, Hezbollah's presumed defeat began to transform into a victory. The limit was drawn by what came to be known as the slaughter of Qana. From that moment on, the Arab governments showed their solidarity with Lebanon and openly criticized the Israeli aggression.

Lessons to be drawn from the Conflict

It is worth underscoring the conclusions that can be drawn at the end of the war between Israel and Lebanon, even if these are not new.

There is no military solution to the conflicts in the Middle East. As happened in its previous invasion of Lebanon, Israel's wager on war was a failure; any future military action will also be a failure. A solution for the devastating conflicts of this region can only be achieved through negotiations. Those who employ creating violence as a means to resolve controversies only contribute to creating more violence and radicalization between the parties involved.

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This interrelatedness should not lead to considering all conflicts equally or finding solutions that are comparable to all of them. In particular, the Israel-Palestine conflict is at the heart of all crisis. It is a conflict resulting from the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. Let us not ignore that this is the greatest affront for the Arab world, one that is perceived as such by its population. As long as no progress is made in the peace process there is no possible solution for the rest of conflicts. The Palestinian question is at the heart of this problem, and our first efforts must be dedicated to it. But a solution shall only be possible if progress is made towards resolving the other conflicts in the region, particularly on the Syrian and Lebanese sides.

A crisis in which the main actors of this zone appear internally weakened is one of the current problems, and peace is unlikely to be inspired by the region itself. Forces and trends in favour of peace can be found in the Middle East, but they need a boost from outside the Arab world.

The US has shown little interest in promoting the

Peace Process in recent years. This may be explained by the fact that they have many fronts to attend in the region, by their perception of the Arab-Israeli conflict or by the importance they give to the Palestinian side. Nonetheless, it is fair to acknowledge that in recent months State Secretary Condoleezza Rice fostered a series of bilateral contacts between the Israeli Prime Minister and the Palestinian Presidency.

Even though the US is a relevant actor in the region, Europe is bound to play a decisive role in the Peace Process. Following the extension of UNIFIL's mandate and for the first time in many years, Europe's presence is not only limited to aspects related to finance or cooperation. By being present on site, Europe is adopting for the first time an active role and assuming political responsibilities of the greatest importance. By sending several thousand troops from France, Italy, Spain, Germany and other European states, the European Union is obliged to take a relevant and active role in the region once and for all. The great challenge ahead is to form a united front, while inspiring a multilateralism leading to a common and autonomous policy. If it fails to do so, the European Union's potential as a key international actor will be called into question. From this viewpoint, the EU can play a major role in calling for the Quartet's full assumption of its responsibilities, including an outreach toward the main regional actors. A Palestine unity government may well provide the opportunity to reinforce Europe's position, consolidate a common posture and work towards achieving peace. If this is not pursued, the Middle East shall be most likely hit by the violence and devastation of war once again.