The Second Lebanon War: A White House Perspective

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The outbreak of war in July 2006 was as surprising for the United States as it was for Israel. In addition to the significance for Israel, the results were important for the Bush administration, as they changed the American view of the Israeli-Palestinian situation and destroyed the relationship between Prime Minister Olmert and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Consider the background as we in the administration saw it. In the summer of 2005, Ariel Sharon completed the disengagement from Gaza and thereafter established a new party, Kadima, to give him the political space that he lacked inside Likud to address Palestinian matters. President Bush, always an admirer of leaders who undertook bold moves, strongly supported Sharon in disengaging from Gaza and in forming a new party. After Sharon's second stroke, Olmert became prime minister and Kadima's candidate, and ran on a "convergence" platform (*hitkansut*), applying some of the logic of the Gaza disengagement to Judea and Samaria. He won 29 seats in the late March 2006 elections, a good showing, and formed a coalition that would allow him to govern and move forward with his plans. His initial meetings with Bush were excellent, and it seemed to us that Israel had a determined new leader who might change Israeli-Palestinian relations significantly.

Then came the war in Lebanon. At the outset, we did not second-guess Olmert's decision for war. Like most of the European and Arab states, we assumed the war would be well-managed and the IDF would hurt Hezbollah, severely and quickly. The damage to Hezbollah would be beneficial to all of

us. It would weaken Hezbollah internally and strengthen the new government in Lebanon under Fouad Siniora, which the United States supported; it would weaken the influence of Iran; it would strengthen Israel; and after a quick victory, Olmert would be even better positioned to move forward on the Palestinian front, either through negotiations or through unilateral actions.

When the war began our position was very close to that of Israel: return of the kidnapped soldiers and no return to the status quo ante. Hezbollah should lose and be seen to lose – a position the Arabs took as well, and behind closed doors, many Arab diplomats put their hopes in the IDF. We in the White House opposed a quick ceasefire, because we wanted the IDF to pound Hezbollah and because a quick ceasefire would mean no change in the underlying situation, with Hezbollah in control of South Lebanon. Thus it was that on July 19, 2006, Secretary Rice publicly rejected calls for an immediate ceasefire, and at the Rome conference of foreign ministers on July 26 she resisted the tearful presentation of Siniora and pressure from every other participant for such a ceasefire. When before the meeting we met with the host, Italian Foreign Minister Massimo d'Alema, she told him flatly that the United States would block any declaration calling for an immediate ceasefire and Israeli withdrawal.

What we had in mind was some enforcement of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for disarming non-governmental militias (such as Hezbollah) and enforcing Lebanese government sovereignty throughout Lebanon. We thought a new and strong international presence, perhaps a NATO force, would be useful, along with a border police force with foreign participation, to guard the Lebanese-Syrian border and prevent the smuggling of Syrian weapons to Hezbollah.

But after two weeks of war, new realities began to surface. The IDF was not decimating Hezbollah, as just about everyone had expected. The fact that combat continued meant that there was, inevitably, some damage to the infrastructure and collateral damage to civilian life. Hezbollah did a masterful job at propaganda that falsely multiplied the scale of damage, and in this it was greatly aided by Siniora and his government.

All of this meant that the isolation of the United States grew – as did the ensuing pressure. From my perspective, this did not affect President Bush much, but it did matter to Secretary Rice, who dealt personally with the conflict every day. The Arab governments grew nervous, because their "street" was watching *al-Jazeera* depict the total destruction of Lebanon.

This was a lie, but a powerful one. Typically, the Europeans wrung their hands – and that was all they did or even thought about doing. Our discussions of the international force that would replace or supplement UNIFIL went nowhere. We had thought of German participation in a border police force, and the Germans were well situated to supply training, personnel, and money for it. The only problem was that they absolutely refused. Also central to the problem of an enhanced international presence was that Siniora would not demand it; he was apparently afraid of Hezbollah, and of appearing to compromise Lebanese sovereignty by bringing back foreign troops just a year after Syrian troops had finally left. Either he did not see that these foreign forces would help him maintain sovereignty against Hezbollah, or he was simply too scared to speak about anything but Israeli "war crimes."

So by week three, American resolve was dissipating. There would be no great Israeli victory; we had no allies in holding out for something better than the status quo ante; Siniora was acting essentially as Hezbollah's advocate; and to Rice, Israeli policy seemed lost, to the point that she began to lose confidence in Olmert and in the IDF. When we met with Olmert, he would say, "I need ten more days" to inflict qualitative damage on Hezbollah. When we would meet or speak five days later, he would say, "I need ten more days" all over again. But there was little evidence, or at least none we saw, that in fact significantly more damage would be done to Hezbollah if Olmert got a bit more time. This was critical, because it undermined the logic of resisting all the international pressure and continuing the war.

Rice had another major concern: Siniora and the government of Lebanon, which we had endorsed after the Cedar Revolution of 2005 and the Lebanese elections that year as an example of the growth of Arab democracy. Lebanon had a government, under Hariri's Future Movement, that received US aid, and Rice feared this war would destroy it. (Before the war, I too had liked and respected Siniora, a technocrat who seemed honest and competent. During the war, I came to see him as a narrow nationalist whose fear of Hezbollah and hatred for Israel were his leading motivations.) Rice's concern with Siniora's survival led her even to accept his position on Shab'a Farms. When he first raised it, Rice had told him that it was a ridiculous demand; the United Nations had certified that Israel had withdrawn from all Lebanese territory in 2000, meaning that it viewed Shab'a as part of the Syrian Golan, and not part of Lebanon. But Siniora hammered away at this, perhaps because it was easier for him to discuss Shab'a for hours on end than to discuss the

war that Hezbollah had brought upon his country. A few weeks into the war, Rice was telling Olmert and Livni that any UN resolution ending the conflict had to mention Shab'a – a position they rightly rejected.

By week three we could begin to see that despite the talk about "no return to the status quo ante," that was the most likely outcome. What, after all, would change? There would be no big and powerful international force in Lebanon; there were no volunteers. Israel would obviously damage Hezbollah, but it was not at all clear that this damage would be fatal for the organization militarily or politically. In fact, the longer the war went on and the longer Hezbollah survived Israel's attack, the greater its popularity and legend might grow.

So Rice put together a set of ideas about a ceasefire that would at least appear to meet our goals and Israel's. Those principles from UN Security Council Resolution 1559 about Lebanese national sovereignty, the disarmament of militias, and Lebanese Armed Forces dominance in South Lebanon would all be adopted, even if many of us thought these were mere words. By late July, Olmert and Siniora were on board, and Rice would visit Jerusalem, Beirut, Jerusalem again, and then fly to New York to present her achievement to the Security Council. It would adopt a resolution containing the key provisions, and the fighting would end.

But then came Qana. On the night of July 29-30, 2006, an Israeli strike on a building in South Lebanon killed dozens of civilians. This was bad enough, and a reminder that such things can always happen in war. Worse yet, the accounts Israel presented to us changed hour by hour, deepening Rice's distrust in Olmert and the IDF. Moreover, the timing was particularly problematic: she was going to Beirut to get Siniora's agreement to principles Olmert had accepted, and would soon be in the Security Council to end the war, where her triumph would be celebrated. For the Bush administration, bogged down in a losing war in Iraq and with low popularity ratings, this would be a major achievement.

Yet suddenly, all was overturned. Rice called Siniora on the morning of July 30, and he said she could not come to Beirut. He then made a speech calling Israel's leaders "war criminals" and referring to "Israeli massacres," rhetoric that had its impact in the Arab world and Europe. So we – Secretary Rice's group – went home, after a most unpleasant meeting with Olmert. He agreed to a 48-hour ceasefire but did not see what Rice saw: the handwriting was on the wall, and this war had to end, fast. Oddly enough, at this meeting

Olmert asked for ten more days and Rice said that was impossible; we would be in the Security Council in two or three days. In the end, Olmert got the ten days and more because the final Security Council resolution did not come until August 11, and Israel did not accept it and stop fighting until August 13.

Actually, the United States and France presented a solid resolution draft on August 4, but it was too favorable to Israel to pass: for example, it did not call for an immediate Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. The draft we presented on August 8 reflected Arab League pressure, France's wilting under that pressure, and activity by Qatar, a Security Council member that year. Resolution 1701 was adopted on August 11, and it had some good language about essential changes on the ground: full control of Lebanon by the Lebanese government and armed forces, disarmament of all militias, no supply of arms to anyone but the armed forces, and a much stronger UNIFIL. But none of this, of course, came to fruition: Hezbollah became larger and better armed, the Lebanese government and armed forces are weaker in the South, and though UNIFIL was enlarged, it remained unable and unwilling to challenge Hezbollah.

Why was more not achieved? Israel could not win at the United Nations, nor could the United States earn for Israel what Israel itself had not achieved on the battlefield. It had not crushed Hezbollah, and having failed to achieve its military goals it could not achieve its diplomatic goals.

When this became evident to Israel, Olmert suffered political damage from which he never recovered. For Rice, this had important implications in the Israeli-Palestinian context. The United States policy on the Palestinians in 2004-2005 was to back Sharon and disengagement from Gaza. When Olmert came to power in 2006, our policy became backing Olmert and convergence. But in the four months between Olmert's election victory in March and the outbreak of war in July, the Prime Minister was not able to do much. Now, we thought, he never would be. Convergence died in Lebanon. In this sense there is a direct line from Qana to Annapolis: from the moment when Rice concluded that she could not rely on Israeli power and acumen, to the diplomatic process that she engineered to try for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement.

Rice came to believe that she, and not Israel, would need to lead. As Eliot Cohen, her counselor at the State Department put it to me later, "The Lebanon war was a traumatic experience. It colored a lot of things thereafter…and there were a couple of elements to it. One was her own sense of having

extended herself to defend the Israelis as they bumbled along in Lebanon. Another was a profound sense of Israeli incompetence at managing their own security affairs. And a third element was a personal distrust of Olmert – quite different from her view of Sharon." In her eyes, the Olmert approach to the Palestinians was now dead. There was a vacuum, and she planned to fill it. This is how the Annapolis conference was born.

Flying home from Israel on July 30, after the Qana disaster, she was already planning. It seemed to her that given the Iraq war and the Lebanon war, "people are lost now in the Middle East and we need to act." She was thinking big, about comprehensive agreements that would include Israel, the Palestinians, and perhaps Syria, and a big international gathering hosted by President Bush. Recalling Clinton's error at Camp David, where his effort had no Arab support, she contemplated replacing the Middle East Quartet with Arab states and involving them early. A week later, on August 6, we met at her Watergate apartment to discuss her new ideas. She had already discussed them with James Baker and Brent Scowcroft, asking how they had organized the Madrid Conference of 1991. She had had her assistants at the State Department draw up plans to put a US National Guard division in the West Bank, to keep the peace when the IDF withdrew. She began to espouse the old State Department Arabist line that our relations with the Arab states require movement on the Israeli-Palestinian front, especially now during the war in Iraq.

This struck me as unrealistic in the extreme, but in judging her diplomatic approach, we should remember that in a way it was supported by Olmert. As early as August, days after the Lebanon war ended, Olmert was commencing an approach to Syria via the Turks. Moreover, he did not give up his Palestinian effort and indeed pushed it forward; throughout 2007 and 2008 he told Bush that a deal with the Palestinians was realistic and possible, and that he was determined to achieve it. Critics may say that with corruption allegations arising and with his time in office likely shortened by perceptions of defeat in Lebanon, Olmert wanted to move fast. Whatever the personal motivation related to police investigations, surely the loss of popularity due to Lebanon affected his push for a Palestinian deal – and the way he spoke about it with Rice and Bush. The tension with Rice continued, and after the war in Lebanon I do not recall one good, pleasant meeting between them. But they were both sending Bush the same message: we should try for a peace deal while Bush was President, and it was possible by the end of 2008. Whenever I told Bush

it seemed impossible to me, given the distance between the parties and the weakness of the Palestinian leadership, he would respond that Olmert felt differently and was optimistic.

Perhaps for Israel, the Annapolis process actually did no harm in that it took up the diplomatic space from the summer of 2006 to the end of the Bush administration in January 2009, and thereby protected Israel from facing additional pressures in the form of new plans, European efforts, and the like. Sharon had told Bush that he decided to move in Gaza partly because a vacuum created after Arafat pushed Abbas aside in the summer of 2003 had led to all sorts of plans he disliked, from the "Geneva Initiative" to the Ayalon-Nusseibeh "People's Choice" plan. Annapolis kept that from happening. But the damage to Israel's diplomatic standing in the region did not begin to be repaired until September 2007, more than a year after the war, when the Syrian nuclear reactor at al-Kibar was bombed. Looking back at the internal debates in the White House about what to do when the reactor was discovered, I was at first surprised by Bush's decision that the United States would not bomb the reactor. But in retrospect he may have believed that this task should be left to Israel, because if Israel acted that would be a giant step toward rebuilding the confidence in Israeli strength – its own confidence, and that of Arab neighbors – that the Jewish state requires to survive in the Middle East.