

Chapter 11

After the Lebanon War: Iranian Power and its Limitations

*David Menashri*¹

Given the time that has elapsed since the ceasefire ended the Second Lebanon War, a full examination of the war's effects on both sides and on the entire region remains a challenge. However, it is clear that the processes that led to the war, the way the war was conducted, and the war's results will have a lasting impact on the region and beyond. While it is questionable if there is a "new Middle East," it is possible that we are witnessing significant changes such that the current Middle East is different in many ways from the one we knew before. Iran already looks like a regional power and its leadership position has strengthened since the wars in the Persian Gulf and the Fertile Crescent. For their part, the heads of the Islamic regime in Tehran are talking as if Iran is already a global power rather than a growing regional force. This essay will examine the way the Second Lebanon War has apparently contributed to Iran's standing and policies as can be seen in the period following the war.

Over the last three decades Lebanon has become a battleground for various foreign forces, including: the Palestinians, who established a stronghold there after the 1967 war; Syria, which introduced its forces there in 1975; and Israel, which launched several campaigns in Lebanon (particularly after 1982). In the 2006 war, Iran gained from Hizbollah's role, with the cost largely paid in "Lebanese currency." The United States, Europe, and Arab states anxiously followed the war's developments, concerned about the forces behind Hizbollah, especially Iran. Each has

subsequently considered what policy would best further its respective interests.

Lebanon is of particular consequence for Iran, and Tehran has a clear desire to maintain a Shiite stronghold in southern Lebanon, close to Israel's borders. Through Hizbollah, Lebanon provides Iran with a spearhead for disseminating the revolutionary message, a model of successful Islamic activity, and a means of reinforcing its regional and international position. The Palestinian issue, including Jerusalem, is a central element in Islamic solidarity, and Iran's active involvement in the arena – within movements such as Hamas, Hizbollah, and Islamic Jihad – is important to it, both in conceptual and practical terms. The Islamic Revolution, which has retreated from so many of the fundamental principles in its ideological manifesto, is struggling to demonstrate success in its main aims: improving the situation of Iranian society and proving that its ethos offers a cure for the ills of modern society. "Success" in Lebanon, however, is much-needed evidence of the revolution's importance, vis-à-vis domestic public opinion, the Islamic world, and the world at large. In terms of the initial idea of "exporting the revolution," Hizbollah is the flagship pioneer and the most prominent success story thus far, if not the only significant one. Iran is determined to maintain this asset.

Iran has solid links with the Shiites in Lebanon, dating back from long before the revolution in 1979. Revolutionary Iran has supported Hizbollah since its inception in 1982, and has lent it moral, ideological, political, and financial backing, in addition to providing it with military support, including training and weapons. While the Islamic regime in Iran has been forced to adopt a pragmatic approach for the better management of affairs of state in a growing number of areas, in Lebanon, Hizbollah, free of the responsibilities of executive office, can continue maintaining a higher level of ideological purity than even the Islamic regime in Iran. Tehran is proud of its support of Hizbollah, which recognizes the spiritual authority of Iran's supreme leader (Ayatollah Ali Khamanei) as expressed in the Hizbollah ideology and in the pictures of the ayatollah regularly held by protesters and displayed in the offices of the movement's leaders.

A number of developments reinforced Iran's regional standing before the war, and have bolstered it even further since. These enhancements,

however, now share the stage with certain challenges that arose following the war.

Advances for Iran

Extremism reinforced in Iran. The war broke out while the conservatives in Iran were gaining strength. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president in July 2005 following Mohammad Khatami's two terms as president (1997-2005), during which he strove, albeit with little success, to implement a relatively pragmatic policy. Ahmadinejad has pursued a far more extreme line. The pragmatic approach that started in the mid-nineties, whose most notable successes were the elections of Khatami as president, the victory in the municipal elections (1999), and the reform-supporting Majlis (parliament) of 2000, began to regress at the start of the third millennium. Following the advances of the mid-late 1990s, a crusade began against the reformers in Iran. The extremist pattern increased with the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada (September 2000) and the events of September 11, 2001. The United States policy in the region, and President Bush's inclusion of Iran on the "axis of evil" (January 2002) led to further escalation in Iran. Although Iran gained appreciably from the "the great Satan," as the US is known in revolutionary jargon, in its removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (2002) and the toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq (2003), Iran did not express any gratitude for these "services" and did not seriously consider moderating its position (even if there were some voices that favored these ideas at some points).

Since then the conservative elements in Iranian politics have become stronger. In 2003 the conservatives won a clear victory in the local elections (after the victory of the reformists in 1999), in 2004 they won by a large margin in the Majlis elections (unlike the 2000 elections), and one year later Ahmadinejad, the most extreme of the presidential candidates, was elected. Soon after his election Ahmadinejad enhanced his international profile and became a renowned world leader who worked to consolidate his agenda. A number of developments worked in his favor. Domestic factors included the increase in the oil prices; the weakening of pragmatic groups; and his success in uniting the public on the issue of the Iranian nuclear program, which is viewed as a national interest. Outside the country, Iran's position

was strengthened by Saddam's downfall, the United States' complications in Iraq, the growing power of Shiite communities in the region, and the political vacuum left by the Arab states in Iraq and other places as well.

Iran's spearheading a clash of civilizations. Lebanon inauspiciously became a microcosm of a far more extensive struggle – a clash of civilizations on two parallel levels: Western culture versus Islam under the aegis of Iran; and within the Islamic world, the Sunni majority versus the emerging Shiite community, which Iran envisioned itself leading. Placing itself at the forefront of Islamist struggles is a clear ideological choice, aimed at bolstering Iran's position in the regional and global arenas. This is also a strategic decision of the Islamic regime, and Iran appears determined to further it.

Decline of Arab stature in the Middle East arena. The Arab world has changed and has reacted passively to momentous events in the region (in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian arena). This recurring pattern of behavior has had a significant impact on what is often called "the Arab Middle East." The emerging alternative is in fact the superiority of the non-Arab elements in the region, especially Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Alongside the weakening of the Arab power, repression of the Taliban, and the collapse of the Baath regime of Saddam Hussein on both sides of its borders, Iran was boosted by consolidation of its position in the Persian Gulf. The withdrawal of Israel (2000) and Syria (2005) from Lebanon presented an extensive potential area for activity in the Fertile Crescent. The growing popularity of Hizbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah and of Ahmadinejad among various sectors of the public in Arab states also emphasizes the gap between the public and the leaders of certain Arab states. Hizbollah's stalwart performance during the Second Lebanon War provides inspiration for radical movements in the moderate Arab states and bolsters the importance of Iran, which defines itself as "the academy of the Islamic revolution." Iran is happy to fill the vacuum left by Arab states, and this pattern is apparently progressing uninterrupted, unless real change occurs in the policies of the Arab states, principally Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Strengthening the Shiite standing in the Islamic theater. This emerging pattern changes somewhat the internal Islamic balance between the Sunni majority and Shiite minority (which even according to generous

assessments represents less than 15 percent of Muslims). True, the Shiite world is far from homogenous, and there are significant differences between Iraqi Shiites and Iranian Shiites. For example, the senior religious cleric in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, himself of Iranian origin, challenges some of the basic principles in the teachings of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, including the principle of “rule of the jurisconsult”; during the Iran-Iraq War the Shiites in Iraq generally remained faithful to their country, just as the Arabs in Iran remained loyal to Iran when the Iraqi troops invaded Iran in 1980. In fact, even in Iranian Ithna-Ashri Shia, there are considerable ideological differences between the various senior religious leaders. At the beginning of the revolution a senior religious figure, Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari, was placed under house arrest, as was Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri more recently. It is also clear that Sunni Islam predominates throughout the Islamic world as well as in the Middle East, and Sunni leaders will fight to ensure that their views represent the Muslim world. Nevertheless, the rise in the Shiite standing constitutes a significant change in the Middle East. Other than Iran (which has a large Shiite majority), Iraq is the first Arab country where the Shiites (who account for about 60 percent of the population) are now in government, while in Lebanon the Shiites are currently the largest religious minority (rapidly approaching half of the population of Lebanon). The inferior standing of the Shiites (socially, economically, and politically) and their proxies now looks like part of the distant past. The Shiite banner, flaunted by Iran and spanning the area from Iraq to Lebanon (with important Shiite pockets in the Gulf emirates, and with Iran’s strategic ally Syria under Baath leadership), is an additional source of Iran’s sense of strength, as well as a matter of concern for Sunni Arab states.

Iran’s senior status in Lebanon. Iran has exerted its influence in Lebanon for a long time, and its position there was enhanced by the withdrawal of Israel and Syria from Lebanon. It was further bolstered by Hizbollah’s “victory” in the war with Israel, although the definition of victory or defeat in this kind of war is largely contingent on the approach of the individual party and on public consciousness. In many respects it is difficult to view the results of the war as a victory for Hizbollah (or for Iran). The heavy losses suffered by Hizbollah, the damage inflicted on its military and organizational infrastructure, and the fact that Nasrallah was forced into

hiding following the war do not indicate victory in the conventional sense. However, the public perception of victory in the Arab world propagated by Hizbollah and Iran (and Syria), in contrast with the gloom and the soul searching in Israel, fueled the sense that Hizbollah's approach is the way to contain Israel and the enemies of Islam both in the region and elsewhere. Iran clearly has the copyright on Hizbollah's steadfast resistance and its revolutionary thinking, and it has not disguised its delight.

Progress on the nuclear front. This is undoubtedly the most important issue for Iran, which thus far has shown no desire at all to retreat from its nuclear program. The war in Iraq has only increased Iran's motivation to maintain its program and it is striving to follow North Korea's lead, and not to expose itself to invasion, like Iraq. The difficulties the US has encountered in Iraq since the occupation, the fact that no "smoking gun" was found there, the eclipsed aim to "export" democracy to Iraq, the numerous problems confronting the US in applying its policy there, and the fierce internal debate contribute to Iran's initiatives and its sense of strength. The increase in oil prices has reinforced the sense of security and pretensions of the Islamic leadership, and the fact that other countries in the region have a nuclear capability has further encouraged its aspirations to join the elite nuclear club. The inconsistency in the Western position essentially allows Iran to continue with its program while standing firm against the West. China and Russia are not entirely supportive of strict sanctions on Iran, and the European position is not definitive. Even public opinion in the United States does not support significant measures against Iran, and certainly not before the diplomatic channel has been exhausted.

Finally, the successful art of Iranian diplomacy. Iran has rich experience in foreign policy, more than any other country in the region. Since the 1979 revolution the religious leaders have displayed great sophistication. They have successfully implemented a policy designed to divide the opposing camp, using double entendres and occasionally intentionally – and overtly – misleading the world. They have fully exploited the particular interests of the various actors (such as China and Russia) in order to buy time, improve their regional position, and continue with their nuclear program. They have both shut the door in the face of the West and at the same time opened a window. Their responses to the proposals made to them have been neither categorical rejections nor full-fledged endorsements. They veer between

“yes, but” and “no, however” and leave the US and its allies pondering the viability of solving the Iranian nuclear problem through diplomatic means. For now, the nuclear program clock continues ticking, and it is working in Iran’s favor.

Challenges to Iran

These advances are not insignificant achievements. However, even with these achievements, Iran is exposed to quite a few challenges, and some have also been exacerbated in the wake of the war in Lebanon. Moreover, while Iran’s gains pre-dated the war and were for the most part unrelated to it, the challenges are largely a direct result of the war. In this respect, the war damaged Iranian interests no less than it advanced them.

Domestic public discontent has increased, particularly due to economic difficulties and diminished civil liberties, and there are also complaints over assistance provided to distant movements, in other words, identification with radical movements at the expense of domestic investment. There are a significant number of Iranians who in the past have criticized support of radical movements outside the country, both for ideological reasons and on pragmatic and economic grounds. Iran’s clear identification with movements such as Hamas and Hizbollah is seen by many to damage Iran’s image. Others have complained about the financial aid given to these movements, which impinges on Iran’s domestic budget. During the war a famous Persian proverb was often heard: “If the lantern is needed at home, donating it to the mosque is *haram* [forbidden]”—i.e., even if supporting Hizbollah is a holy cause, “one’s own poor” should still be taken care of first.

Lebanon’s rehabilitation, particularly in southern Lebanon and parts of Beirut, is another issue. When the dust of the war settled, Lebanese citizens could see the extent of the destruction. Plainly, many blamed Iran. If Iran provides generous assistance, questions will be raised inside Iran (where some areas have not yet been fully rehabilitated following the long Iran-Iraq War). If Iran does not provide significant aid it will be held even more accountable by the Lebanese, at least the non-Shiite segments of the population. The rise in oil prices also has its drawbacks. The public may one day demand to know where all the money that the state earned from

the rising price of oil has gone (the price of oil has increased threefold in the last five years). History, of course, does not repeat itself, but the lessons to be learned from it should not be ignored either. Following the 1973 war there was a sharp rise in oil prices, increasing Iran's income significantly, and the Islamic Revolution erupted only five years later. Given the surge in oil revenue, probing questions are already surfacing in this context.

On the international front, the world became more aware of the challenges posed by Islamic radicalism fueled by Iran, and even Europe now seems more aware that the challenges presented by Iran are not in its interest. Following the war there was concern in Iran that pressure on it would increase (this was the case with the Security Council resolution of July 31 that for the first time threatened to impose sanctions on Iran if it did not change its nuclear policy). Even if these concerns have dissipated for the while, the impressions of the war, along with Iran's nuclear program, the rise of political Islam on "the Arab street," and the rise of Islamic extremism in European capitals are now being felt in Europe.

Tension between Iran and its neighbors is also increasing against the backdrop of Iran's policy in Iraq, in Lebanon, and on the Palestinian issue, the strengthening of Shiite Islam, and the nuclear challenge. Following the war, Sunni religious leaders made extreme statements against the Persian-Shiites. It is hard to believe that this is a temporary development. It seems to run even deeper than what appears on the surface. Leaders of the Arab states are also feeling the pressure, both from Iran and from radical elements in the various Arab countries.

The possibility of a peace initiative between Israel and Syria may also confront Iran with a considerable challenge. Much to Iran's undisguised displeasure, Syria engaged in negotiations with Israel a decade ago, and the Palestinians pursued a diplomatic course of their own with even greater intensity. Although Hamas is currently in government, if and when there is a change in the Palestinian Authority or in Hamas's policy preferences, or if a peace initiative develops between Israel and the Palestinians or between Israel and Syria, Iran may face a far more rigorous challenge.

The most serious factor for Iran is President Bush's determination to suppress the "axis of evil." Although the majority gained by the Democrats in both houses of Congress in the 2006 elections has weakened Bush's position, and while he has also left an opening for dialogue with the Iranian

leaders, viewed from Tehran President Bush still appears capable of taking stern action against them.

Iran heralds the war as a victory, and may have had its own interest in increasing tension on Israel's borders prior to the July 15 G-8 summit, where the main issue was Iran's nuclear program. On the other hand, it does not seem that Iran was interested in an Israeli reaction of such intensity, and the results of the fighting inflicted a heavy blow on its power bases in Lebanon long before Iran was interested in such an escalation.

These underlying factors help explain the unusual amount of time given to Israel by the United States and Europe (and, indirectly, moderate Arab states as well) to fight Hizbollah before calling for a ceasefire. At least for the United States, the Second Lebanon War was just one phase of a broader war against Islamic radicalism, with Iran as the primary country supporting it. Israel viewed the Second Lebanon War as its war, but also believed that the broader context of the Iranian challenge, principally the nuclear issue, should be addressed by the United States and its Western allies, and not by Israel.

Potential Sources of Change

The United States, European countries, China, and Russia. In the period since the ceasefire, it does not look like the world is ready to confront Iran. In practice, even the United States has sent hints of goodwill towards Iran, for example by allowing former President Khatami to visit the United States, and as reflected in President Bush's measured words in his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September. The Baker-Hamilton report on Iraq (released on December 6, 2006) furthered this trend. West European countries too do not seem overly enthusiastic about confronting Iran, and Russia and China have also publicly expressed more moderate positions towards Tehran. Nevertheless, there is still concern in Iran about a tough response from the United States, whether designed to strike at Iran or to extricate itself from the Iraqi morass.

Several steps taken since late in 2006 pressured Iran further. The Security Council resolution to impose sanctions on Iran, approved unanimously by all fifteen members, sent a stern message to Iran. Also, in December US forces arrested two Iranians in Iraq (two others with diplomatic immunity

were released). In January 2007, the United States announced the dispatch of additional forces to Iraq, and on January 11 US troops raided Iranian targets in the Kurdish town of Irbil. As such, the “American solution” appears possible based on two contradictory but apparently complementary trends: an initiative for dialogue to find an agreed solution, and drastic US action, preferably with a supporting coalition. It is uncertain whether an American initiative for dialogue will produce meaningful results. However, without it the US will have more difficulty implementing a more decisive policy, certainly in terms of China and Russia, but also with regard to European countries and possibly even in the context of US public opinion.

Arab states. A potentially important means of motivating a process of change would be an Arab-Israeli dialogue on the Palestinian issue. Galvanizing negotiations through moderate Arab regimes may provide a suitable solution for radicalization generated by Iran and the Islamic movements. This is a challenge that faces Israel and its Arab neighbors. Although the results of the war make it even harder to advance along this route, clearly the progress with the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians or with the Syrians (and certainly with both) may weaken Iran’s position in the arena.

A change of direction in Iran. Ultimately, there is the possibility of change within Iran itself. One possibility would be the present administration agreeing to change its policy, which does not look likely given the current political reality in Iran, although it is not entirely impossible; and another possibility would be internal change that forces the government to embrace a different policy.

In the last century, the Iranian public has demonstrated a high degree of political involvement and generated considerable change. The public continues to be alert and involved. The results of the December 15, 2006 elections to local municipalities and the Assembly of Experts reflect a considerable level of discontent with the president’s policies (and indeed, his rivals scored some noticeable gains). Even if it is difficult to discern a fundamental change in the political arena emanating from these elections, they express displeasure with domestic politics, though still within the narrow confines of the struggle between the movements inside the government establishment. More importantly, in the twentieth century Iran went through two large popular uprisings (the constitutional revolution of

1906, whose centenary was marked last year) and the Islamic Revolution, interspersed by the popular movement of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq (1951-53). Even after the Islamic Revolution, the youth movements, women's organizations, press, cinema industry, and extensive use of the internet amaze the foreign observer. Over the last twenty-eight years the Islamic regime has resisted the movements that have opposed it, both from within and outside the regime. Does the future offer other possibilities? It is hard to forecast.

It appears as if two processes are taking place in Iran simultaneously: a process of policy change and possibly even internal change, and a process of obtaining a nuclear capability. In the view of the free world, it would be better if Iran did not realize the nuclear option first, although reality does not necessarily support this preference.

Although the neo-conservatives are currently in government in Iran, it seems that the fight over revolutionary Iran's path has not yet been ultimately decided. Popular movements are difficult to foresee; as one Israeli song explains, "suddenly, a man gets up in the morning and feels he is a nation, and starts to move forward." Researchers of the past are unable to foresee the route the public will choose. If and when the public imposes its will, its position will not be contingent on the degree of reversion to Islam or Iran's influence in Lebanon, rather mainly on the extent to which the revolutionary regime satisfies the expectations that fueled the revolution's early days – the promise of a better life and greater freedom for the Iranian people, and proof that their slogan "Islam is the solution" actually provides a response to the citizen's expectations.

Ahmadinejad made generous Robin Hood-style promises that he would take from the rich and give generously to the poor, and he instilled new hope that his approach offers a solution to the problems of the modern era. The burden of proof now rests on him, and the battlefield is the Iranian domestic arena. This is not an easy task, and its achievement (or lack of achievement) embodies the main possibility for significant change in Iranian policy.

Note

1. For a detailed discussion on the domestic developments and Iran's regional policy in their wider historical perspective, see my *Post-Revolutionary Politics*

in Iran: Religion, Society and Power (London: Frank Cass, 2000). For Iran's regional policy see my recent article "Iran's Regional Policy: Between Radicalism and Pragmatism," *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 2 (2007): 153-67.