

Chapter 13

The Second Lebanon War: The Regional Setting

Asher Susser

The 2006 Lebanon War was not just another round of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Departing from the familiar pattern of classic warfare, this was a subconventional, asymmetric war between Israel and Hizbollah, a non-state, irregular force waging a guerilla war. However, and more importantly, this was not essentially an Arab-Israeli war in the traditional sense, rather an indirect confrontation between Israel and Iran through the latter's Shiite proxy in Lebanon – Hizbollah. For the most part, with the exception of Syria, the Arab Sunni Muslim countries played the part of passive bystanders. Some who had fought against Israel in the past even hoped that the war would lead to an Israeli victory over the Iran-Hizbollah alliance, which has also supported the Islamic revolutionary forces in the arena that threaten numerous Arab regimes.

The “new Middle East” of the last generation has experienced profound historical changes, and the Second Lebanon War was largely an expression of them. These include a relative weakening of the Arab states and the pan-Arab system; the relative empowerment of non-Arab Middle Eastern states; the bolstering of sub-state players in the arena; changes in the historic balance of power between the Sunnis and Shiites; and a change in the regional perception of the center and periphery.

The Weakening of the Arab States

For many years the terms “Arab world” and “Middle East” were considered to be interchangeable, based on the view that the Arabs were the main force setting the regional agenda. This is no longer true. When in April 2003 American forces took Baghdad, the glorious capital of the Abbasid Caliphate and one of the historic centers of Islamic and Arab culture, Arab states stood by and did nothing. When Israel fought Hizbollah for a month in the summer of 2006, the Arab states – with the exception of Syria, which helped Hizbollah – looked on passively. The Arab League has been impotent for some time and has been the butt of derision in Arab public opinion.

At the height of Egyptian president Abdel Nasser’s power, around half a century ago, the reality was different. Nasser was the unrivaled leader of all Arabs when he blocked attempts by the Western powers to establish an anti-Soviet defense pact; when he defiantly stood up to the West and nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956; and when he stayed in power following “the tripartite aggression” of France, Britain, and Israel. Nasser stood for Arab unity, Arab socialism, and an alliance with the Soviet Union in the Cold War as the assured path to modernity and renewed Arab power. However, Nasser was a false messiah and all collapsed in the Six Day War of June 1967. Today, there are those who compare Hassan Nasrallah with Abdel Nasser at his peak, yet the comparison is unfounded. Nasrallah indeed enjoys extensive public support in the Arab world, as someone who stood up to Israel in a war and even inflicted substantial damage on the country and its population. Yet Nasrallah is not president of the largest and most powerful Arab country, but leader of one ethnic community in a small and weak Arab state that is supported by Shiite Iran, with which many in the largely Sunni Arab world do not identify at all.

The collapse of the pan-Arab unity of Abdel Nasser left an ideological vacuum that was simultaneously filled by two contradictory processes: consolidation of the territorial state and Arab acceptance of the existing state order versus a radical Islamic revival that is challenging the Arab regimes and the state order. In the confrontations between the regimes and the Islamic movements, the Arab regimes have generally gained the upper hand. Yet even if the regimes have survived this challenge, they have had

less success with the challenges of modernity and globalization. The gaps between their countries and the countries of the Western world continued to grow. UN reports on the socioeconomic state of Arab countries in recent years depicted a pessimistic picture of countries with a high population growth rate compared with their rate of economic growth, and of countries submerged in an ongoing crisis. Even the sharp rise in oil prices did not help, and certainly not for the Arab countries that are not blessed with this natural resource. In general, in recent decades, the Arab countries have weakened, and each has lost whatever hegemony or leadership it once enjoyed.

Egypt of the post-Nasser period has become increasingly insular. This is reflected in the stable peace agreement with Israel and was highlighted afresh during the 2006 war in Lebanon, when President Mubarak explicitly stated that Egypt did not intend to become involved in outside conflicts. Despite Egypt's image as a leader in the Middle East, it is struggling increasingly to bridge the gap that exists between image and reality, and its ambition of yesteryear has faded significantly. Egypt is a relatively poor Third World country that is hard pressed to exert any influence on its neighbors. The Palestinians do not generally heed it, and Fatah and Hamas allow themselves to ignore Cairo. For some years genocide has been taking place in the Darfur region of Sudan. Egypt has no part in it, and it does not have any responsibility for events taking place there. But this also clearly reflects Egypt's new standing. Half a century ago, in the name of unity of the Nile Valley, Egypt claimed Sudan as part of its own sovereign territory. Today, it does not have the ability, or interest, to exert influence in Sudan to put an end to the horrors underway there.

Syria under Bashar al-Asad is but a shadow of the regional power it once was during the height of the reign of his father, Hafez al-Asad, when the Soviet Union provided it with superpower strategic backing. Syria is isolated and surrounded by forces of the United States and its regional allies, and was also recently ousted from Lebanon. It is supported by Iran and enjoys significant military strength, but its army has to contend with problems of modernization at a time that the national economy is in tatters. While in the past there was frequent discussion of rivalry between the Syrian and Iraqi Baath regimes for hegemony in the Arab east, today that

is completely irrelevant. The Syrian Baath is no longer so important, even within Syria, and the Iraqi Baath party no longer exists at all.

Iraq is under American occupation and is in a state of chaos, possibly on the brink of total disintegration. In the absence of figures like Saddam Hussein or Hafez al-Asad, there is a distinct leadership void in the Fertile Crescent.

Saudi Arabia is not as rich as it once was, even though oil prices are soaring, and this is due to a particularly high population growth rate. The GNP in Israel is far higher than in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the Saudis have recently suffered from insecurity, due to internal terror and a less intimate relationship with the United States since the attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001, in which most of the terrorists were of Saudi nationality.

The Kingdom of Jordan, which was never a regional power, is in dire straits. It is under pressure from its western flank, due to the internal disorder in the Palestinian Authority and the elections there that brought Hamas to power in January 2006, while on the east there is the chaos in Iraq. These factors combine to imbue Jordan with a deep sense of concern and helplessness in view of these neighboring centers of instability, and without having the ability to influence either.

The Relative Strengthening of the Non-Arab States

The weakening of the Arab state system has led to a relative increase in influence on the regional agenda by the non-Arab countries, including outside players such as the United States and to a lesser degree the European Union. The United States' standing, diminished as long as it remains entrenched in the Iraqi morass, clearly still projects the image and exerts the influence of a superpower.

For the purposes of this analysis, the particularly important non-Arab countries are Iran, Turkey, and Israel. These three countries shape the regional agenda more than all the Arab states together. Iran's increased regional influence is evident and pervasive. The collapse of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which was the main obstacle to the increasing influence of Iran, and its evolution into a Shiite-dominated country, have afforded Iran the greatest level of influence in the Arab world it has ever had in the

modern era. The more the United States becomes enmeshed in Iraq and the higher the oil prices climb, the more Iran allows itself to confront the West and Israel with increased confidence. This pattern is not significantly affected by Israel's limited achievements in the war in Lebanon. It seems that Iran's determination to continue working towards achieving nuclear weapons and advancing its hegemonic aspirations has only grown.

Another non-Arab power that has achieved greater influence following the weakening of the Arab countries is Turkey. Turkey borders the Arab world in the Fertile Crescent as a giant country stretching from Greece in the west as far as Iran in the east. It controls the water sources of Syria and Iraq and has the largest and strongest army in the Middle East. Since November 2002 Turkey has been controlled by AKP (the Justice and Development Party), a conservative Islamic party that is increasingly interested in its Muslim hinterland in the Middle East. In recent generations Turkey turned its back on the Middle East as it strove to take its place in Europe. Now it is rediscovering the Middle East, in part due to domestic public opinion, particularly the public that brought the ruling party to power. This trend is also reinforced by the growing disappointment with Europe, which has stymied Turkey's attempts to join the European Union with endless delay tactics, and due to tension with the United States over the future of Iraq, where the continued development of the independence of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq is not at all to Turkey's liking. It is no exaggeration to say that Iran and Turkey have more influence over Syria and the future of Iraq than all the Arab states and possibly even the United States.

Third on this list of non-Arab regional powers is Israel. In military, technological, and economic terms, Israel is still superior to its neighbors. It is thought to have a nuclear capability, and while it has a population little more than 7 million, Israel's per capita GNP is higher than the per capita GNP of all its neighbors combined (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority), even though the neighboring countries have a total population of some 110 million people. Israel's per capita GNP is far higher than that of Saudi Arabia, despite the latter's oil reserves and the recent unprecedented high prices of oil.

The Rise of the Non-State Actors

Another side effect of the decline in the Arab states' power, besides the relative strengthening of the non-Arab countries, is the ascendance of the non-state players. While Arab countries have deteriorated into failed states, organizations such as al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hizbollah, and the groups represented by Zarkawi and his heirs in Iraq have gained in strength. Chaos in Iraq has reached such proportions that the country may be on the brink of disintegration into a Kurdish state in the north, a Shiite state in the south, and a Sunni state between them in the center. The disintegration of Iraq may have destructive implications for the entire region. Jordan is concerned about a flood of refugees from the poverty-stricken Sunni region (Iraqi oil reserves are located in the Kurdish north and Shiite south); Turkey fears subversive operations by a Kurdish state within the Kurdish community in eastern Turkey; and Iran may gain from having a small Shiite state that will be more dependent on it than a federative Arab-Kurdish Iraqi state. Hizbollah has established a pseudo state within a state in Lebanon that was already used to exert Iranian influence on the region, and the incipient Palestinian state led by the failing and corrupt PLO leadership has fallen into the hands of Hamas, only to sink deeper into the chaos of almost total disintegration.

Changes in the Historic Balance of Power between Sunna and Shia

In the eastern part of the Arab world, where the Baath regimes of Iraq and Syria once competed for control over most matters, there is now a leadership void that is gradually being filled by Iranian influence to a degree that is unprecedented in the modern era; it is backed by a sense of elevation and empowerment of all Shiites. The sense of self-confidence was evident in the arrogant deportment and speech of Iranian president Ahmadinejad as well as Hassan Nasrallah, at least until the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War, whose intensity, scale, and degree of destruction took Nasrallah by surprise. After hundreds of years since the beginning of Islam, in which the Shiites were "the downtrodden of the world" whose honor was trampled by the Sunnis, the Shiites became the controlling group in Iraq, the first Arab country under Shiite control. Over the past decades

they have become the largest group in Lebanon, accounting for around 40 percent of the population, long outstripping the Maronite and Sunni communities that were the largest groups when the Lebanese republic was established in 1920. The Shiite majority in Bahrain is also encouraged by developments in Iraq, as are the Shiite minorities in the eastern regions of Saudi Arabia, where the kingdom's major oil reserves are located. The concerns of the Sunni Arabs over this change are clear to all.

King Abdullah of Jordan defined the situation correctly back in late 2004 when he expressed his anxiety over the influence of "the Shiite crescent." This was followed in April 2006 when Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak suggested that most Shiite Arabs are more loyal to Iran than the countries in which they live (and, in so doing, unwittingly cast doubt on the cohesiveness of the heterogeneous Arab countries). This Shiite crescent stretches from Tehran through Iraq as far as Lebanon and beyond to the Palestinian Authority. Iran's influence extends as far as the West Bank and Gaza where Iran and Hizbollah have operational and financial links with various Palestinian organizations, including Fatah, Hamas, and of course, Islamic Jihad.

Irrespective of Iraq and rather as a result of the demographic and political changes in Lebanon in the last two generations, the position of the Lebanese Shiite community has strengthened significantly. The largest sector in Lebanon, the Shiites will undoubtedly become a majority in the not too distant future. They were supported by the militant Hizbollah organization, which gave them a distinct advantage over all the other communities that disarmed in accordance with the Ta'if agreement in 1989. Iran, with Syria's backing, helped the organization build a sort of Iranian "external outpost" to pose a threat to Israel and deter it with thousands of rockets aimed at Israel, from the north to as far as Tel Aviv and even further south. Iranian patronage, demonstrated over the years by political, military, and financial aid channeled through Syria, made Hizbollah a virtual state within a state. This "state" not only sported impressive military might but also boasted a no less impressive social welfare system for the Shiites in Lebanon, whose adulation provided Hizbollah with a strong base of public support. This was of crucial importance to enable it to continue fortifying its powerbase in the Lebanese arena.

For Iran and Syria, the arming of Hizbollah and its increase in power bolstered their line of defense (or offense) against Israel. A senior Iranian official said that Hizbollah was one of Iran's "strategic security pillars." The Shiite crescent thus became a clear indication of the error made by those who claimed that Israel had only what to gain from America's war in Iraq. Major Sunni Muslim Arab countries, like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, which are also concerned by the strengthening of Iran and the non-state players, have a common interest with Israel to block the progress of the Shiite crescent and even set it back. Israel certainly expects these Arab countries to display determination in their backing for Lebanese political forces represented by Siniora's government and the non-Shiite communities to contain and restrict the power of Hizbollah and its supporters in Iran and Syria.

The relative weakness of the Arab state system, the spreading of radical Islam, and the strengthening of primordial sub-state groups not only undermine the cohesiveness of some Arab countries; they also impact on the nature of inter-Arab relations. If in the past relations between Arab states were determined by dynastic lines (during the era of monarchies), then "progressive" and pro-Soviet republican regimes that opposed pro-Western "reactionary" monarchies (during the period of the Free Officers Revolution and the Cold War), today inter-state relations have become more primordial and ethnic-based: Sunnis versus Shiites and Arabs versus non-Arabs.

A Change in Perception of Core and Periphery

Given these new parameters, the old division of center and periphery in the Middle East requires reexamination. The Arab Sunni core, of which Egypt served as the geopolitical epicenter, is increasingly becoming the periphery compared with the periphery of Iran and Turkey of the past, which are now turning into the geopolitical core of the Middle East. This is relevant particularly with regard to the shift of the core to the east to a non-Arab and/or non-Sunni epicenter in Iran and in the new Iraq that is subject increasingly to Iranian influence, like the entire Gulf region. The Gulf is, after all, the "Persian Gulf" and not the "Arab Gulf," as the Sunni Arabs would prefer to see it.

Challenges for Israel

In this new Middle East it is no longer the conventional ground forces of the regular Arab armies that pose the most immediate threat to Israel. The range of threats to Israel is dangerous and worrisome, but these are not the familiar threats that focused on the overall conventional Arab military force, which has weakened in recent years. Largely due to the weakness of the Arab system, the traditional threats have been replaced by extra-conventional threats: the sub-conventional warfare of the non-state players; the non-conventional arms race; and the ramifications of the unconventional problem of demographics.

- The sub-conventional warfare of terror, guerilla activities, and war based on rocket and missile fire from the Palestinian Authority and Lebanon, used by non-state players such as Hamas and Hizbollah, is difficult to overcome.
- The Iranian nuclear threat, together with its regional hegemonic design, poses an explicit threat to Israel.
- The undermining of the cohesion of some Arab states may lead to chaos in the Fertile Crescent, resulting from the erosion of the internal unity of heterogeneous societies in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In the case of Iraq this is no longer an assessment, but already a fact.
- Demographic concerns exist on two levels: the domestic level, an issue to which Israel must relate in order to maintain its identity as the state of the Jewish people; and the regional level, where it is clear that the Middle East cannot sustain all of its population over time and millions will continue to migrate to Europe and change its image, a process already underway.
- Israel's international legitimacy is being undermined. In today's reality, whether we like it or not, it is the countries of Western Europe that determine the contours of international legitimacy. As an occupier, Israel does not meet their political-moral criteria. Thus, the continuation of the status quo not only tips the demographic balance against Israel but also erodes its legitimacy as an acceptable member of the family of enlightened nations.

In Israel there is a propensity to focus on each issue separately, and governments tend to shift their attention according to the circumstances at any given time – it can be Syria, the Palestinians, Hizbollah, or Iran. One of the apparent lessons from the Second Lebanon War is that this approach does not meet the needs of the dynamic reality, and resources and consideration should be given simultaneously to all challenges, without ever ignoring any one of them.

Ramifications of the War: Interim Assessment

The war did not shape the general regional patterns described above or the challenges that face Israel. To a great extent the war reflected and heightened awareness of them, across the Middle East and beyond. There now seems to be greater internal Lebanese, Arab, and international determination to adopt policies designed to block Iranian influence in the Shiite crescent and to contain Hizbollah. The deployment of the Lebanese army in the south of the country with an international force as support is a good indication of this new phenomenon. This comes together with domestic Lebanese political trends whereby the non-Shiite forces are trying to prevent Hizbollah from restoring the previous situation, which readily sacrifices Lebanon on the altars of Iranian, Syrian, and Hizbollah interests. The question is whether this is a transient or sustainable phenomenon that can withstand the constant pressure applied by Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah. For now, at least, Hizbollah is being contained in military and political terms and Iran's "external outpost" has been eroded, after it was exposed prematurely and with limited efficiency. On the other hand, the position of the international community – with the possible exception of the United States – is still one of indecision with regard to Iran and its nuclear program, what was already apparent before the war. One may assume that the limited success of Israel's military operation will not suffice to bolster the determination of the international community to act directly against Iran, through sanctions or in any other way.

Lebanon has become a test case in the confrontation between the rival camps in the new Middle East, with the Sunni Arab countries – Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia – seeking to stabilize the state order and to block Iran, the Shiites, and the non-state players that are upsetting the balance

of power. In practice, Israel belongs to the former camp and so, for the first time, Israel has become a member of one of the rival camps in the region and is not excluded based solely on the old definition of Israel as an outsider, an alien force that does not belong to any of the rival blocs within the Arab Middle East.

Lebanon itself is at an historical crossroads. Since its creation Lebanon has struggled with its identity, between the Arab and Western worlds, in terms of Lebanon as a mostly Christian country with close ties to France, or a country in which the Maronites and Sunnis, as the leading communities shared, a common goal of national stability as a part of the Arab – not Western – world. This issue was settled long ago with the decline of France and the Maronites, and Lebanon became a founding member of the Arab League and an Arab country in every respect. Now the question is whether Lebanon will remain an integral part of the Arab world, as the non-Shiite communities in Lebanon (Sunnis, Maronites and other Christians, and the Druze) wish, or will the power of the Shiites, who are by far the largest community and will become the majority in the foreseeable future, drag the country towards Iran and into the Shiite crescent? Israel and the Sunni Arabs now have a common interest to maintain Arab Lebanese sovereignty and weaken the Hizbollah state-within-a-state in Lebanon, and to see a decline in Hizbollah's capacity to erode Lebanon's sovereignty in the service of the interests of Iran and Syria.

The lessons learned by Syria and the Palestinians from the war are not clear cut, and stem from the complex assessment of Israeli deterrence after the war. Both in Syria and among the Palestinians there are those who, following the war, speak highly of the merits of waging a non-conventional struggle, like the one carried out by Hizbollah. The advantage of using rockets and missiles is obvious and they must therefore be acquired at all cost, and the more the better, for effective war to be waged against Israel. However, throughout the Arab world there was a lively debate and multifaceted analysis of the war and its results. Alongside those who saw just the benefits of using missiles and rockets and consider them the wave of the future, others argued that Hizbollah was defeated in an irresponsible war. Now is the time to contain and constrain Hizbollah within the Lebanese political center to prevent the repeated destruction of Lebanon through another escapade on behalf of Iran and Syria at the expense of

Lebanon and the majority of the Arabs. The failures of the IDF's operation notwithstanding, the mass destruction that resulted from the effective use of Israeli airpower was evident to all, as was the fact that during the war, there were hostilities in Gaza that inflicted very heavy losses on the Palestinians at very little cost to the IDF.

All these influence Syria's continued restraint, at least thus far, despite aggressive statements made immediately after the war. The Palestinians are, on the one hand, encouraged by the fighting success of Hizbollah – which is why they are looking to change their own tactics accordingly (more rockets, anti-tank missiles, and subterranean fortifications) in order to continue their struggle against Israel. On the other hand, there is the price paid by Lebanon, evaluated not only in terms of the enormous destruction sustained by the civilian national infrastructure, unprecedented in any of Israel's wars, but also the very extensive problem of refugees, although temporary in Lebanon's case. It is hard to believe that the Palestinians have missed this point.

Thus, they can also draw the conclusion that restraint might be in order. The Palestinians noted Hizbollah's relative efficiency resulting from the disciplined and unified organization of the Shiites in Lebanon, which contrasts sharply with their own total chaos. This may encourage renewed efforts to establish a national unity government that will work to restore law and order and return to the ceasefire agreement (*tahdiya*), and possibly even to engage in dialogue with Israel, and not just on the issue of prisoner exchange.

Israel has a vested interest in the "stateness" of its neighbors, for the sake of stability, security, and the obstruction of the non-state actors, who seek to wreak havoc. This is as relevant to Lebanon as it is to the Palestinian Authority, both in the interests of a regional settlement and the preservation of Israel as the state of the Jewish people, in terms of security and demography. The state-like nature of the neighborhood, in Lebanon and in a Palestinian state, is the only alternative to anarchy, which is hardly in Israel's best interests.