

Chapter 14

The Regional Implications of the War in Lebanon: From Radicalism to Reform

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From a military standpoint, the Second Lebanon War focused on exchanges of fire between Hizbollah and Israel. The war's political, strategic, ideological, and philosophical dimensions, both in Lebanon and throughout the region, were naturally influenced by events on the battlefield, but went far beyond them. Those who initiated the war essentially hoped to impact on these dimensions through the military factor, which subsequently assumed greater importance in and of itself, particularly in the internal Israeli context.

For some years, Lebanon has served as a microcosm of sorts of the regional theater, in which the regional camps compete with each other via their proxies in the hope of gaining political strength and validating their respective ideological and philosophical approaches. This experimental ground generally favored the radical camp, which channeled all its resources directly into the arena and managed to turn Lebanon into a model for forcing "the Zionist enemy" and the West to withdraw. The radical camp's stubborn fighting cleverly exploited the absence of an authoritative central government and the decline in the West's willingness to tolerate casualties in war for the sake of its security and values. One of the regional implications of the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 was the Palestinian terror campaign against Israel, which erupted a few months later and flourished at the expense of the pragmatic sector of the Palestinian camp while marginalizing the reformist elements. It is unclear how much these developments also encouraged global jihad forces that planned to

carry out large scale and prominent terror attacks, and how much, together with the lessons learned from other wars, they impacted on the opponents of the American campaign in Iraq.

However, in something of a dialectic process, the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon also became a catalyst for an attempt by the reformist stream to turn Lebanon into a means of advancing its philosophies. The principal agent here was the reformists' political representative, Rafiq al-Hariri, who was encouraged to shape Lebanon into a state that has the sole authority for the use of force within its borders, and to focus on improving the welfare of Lebanon's citizens rather than on a violent struggle with the West to restore lost Islamic pride. This attempt, whose climax was Security Council resolution 1559, naturally led to heightened tension between the camps in Lebanon that peaked with the assassination of Hariri in February 2005. The assassination highlighted both the potential for change and the depth of commitment of both camps to fight for their philosophies, as reflected in the large demonstrations that followed. The attempt by Hariri's successors in Lebanon, with aid from the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, and other parties, to further the work of the slain prime minister was partially successful, evidenced mainly by the withdrawal of Syria from Lebanon and the increased pressure on Hizbollah to disarm.

This pressure was the factor that impelled Hizbollah to decide to kidnap Israeli soldiers, regardless of the consequences. Nasrallah assumed that this would enable him to demonstrate the importance of his organization in advancing Lebanon's national aims, as he defined them, and to prove once again the validity of his security ethos, whereby Israel could not respond forcefully against Lebanon to a serious provocation carried out against it, both because Lebanon is not responsible for the use of force from its territory and because Israel would not dare exercise its power in response and endanger its soldiers and citizens. Some time earlier, Nasrallah had abandoned the spider web image he had once attributed to Israeli society, but he seemed to prefer to ignore this revisionism when issuing an order to carry out the kidnapping.

The kidnapping, which took place shortly after the soldier Gilad Shalit was kidnapped by Hamas from inside Israel near the Gaza Strip border, and Israel's strong response and pronouncements about its intention to defeat Hizbollah led to a situation in which the war in Lebanon aroused

expectations on both sides of “a big bang,” in other words, of a formative event that would change the essence of the complex and undecided reality. In the United States, in the reformist camp in Lebanon, and even among reformist elements in other Arab countries, a long-held hope reemerged that Israel would do the work for them and would strike Hizbollah and those behind it. There was a sense of disappointment when Israel decided not to broaden the campaign to include Syria.

In practice, the war’s regional impact is still largely unclear because each side magnifies different aspects of the events and interprets them in its own way in order to advance its objectives. The reformists, with the support of the US administration and Israel, correctly note the international community’s efforts to use the war to generate a greater possibility of turning Lebanon into a responsible country, as indicated by Security Council resolution 1701. They also point to the enormous damage inflicted on Lebanon following the kidnapping as evidence of and leverage for the need for reform. The radicals, led by Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah, flaunt their success in thwarting the intention to destroy Hizbollah and in upsetting Israel’s confidence in its military strength as another achievement in their list of victories over the West. The pragmatic elements, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia, with the support of heads of European states, including the prime minister of Britain at the time, fear actual reforms. At the same time, they are concerned over the threat of the radical elements and find proof in the war of their belief that neither side is able to defeat the other. Continuation of the struggle between the sides endangers the stability of the region, which in the view of the pragmatists is essential to their survival. The conclusion they draw is that in order to minimize the damage of the war and reap benefit from its results, such as the erosion of Israel’s image of strength, the illusion of stability should be enhanced through familiar means, in other words, by renewing the political process between Israel and Palestinians regardless of the actual status of this confrontation arena.

Thus, analysis of the regional significances of the war requires the distinction used by Ahad Ha’am in his essay on Moses on the difference between history and archeology, in other words, what actually took place in the war is less important than how it will be recorded in the regional historical memory. An analysis of the events of July-August 2006 reveals contrasting components that together, albeit with much disarray, comprise

the whole of what until now has emerged as the regional historic memory of the war. Despite Nasrallah's repeated attempts to claim that the US president and the British prime minister – and not he, Nasrallah – were responsible, and that Israel in any case planned to declare war in October 2006, the international historical memory has accepted the belief that the initiative for the war came from Nasrallah. This component of the memory is not only important in terms of apportioning blame, but it also has a far wider significance as it makes it hard for the radicals to resort to the mantra that lies at the core of their philosophy, according to which the dire straits of Middle East residents are the result of a dastardly plot devised by the West, led by the US and Israel.

It is not just blame that has been assigned to Nasrallah; it is also hard for him to shake off another important factor of the historical memory of the war, namely, that his initiative was designed to serve foreign interests, specifically of Syria and Iran. In this context, the regional historical memory has also recorded the massive Iranian and Syrian military aid to Hizbollah and the ease and consistency with which Hizbollah fighters, under Iran's guidance, used military force to strike systematically at civilians. The regional significance of this memory may accentuate the Iranian threat in the eyes of the reformist and pragmatic elements, and may position it as the principal regional threat. Indeed, it is possible that their perception of the threat will prompt greater willingness to help restrain the Iranian regime's aspirations of hegemony and power, although it does not appear that these elements will extend themselves sufficiently to achieve significant results.

With regard to the regional balance of deterrence, the war eroded the deterrence image of all those that participated, directly and indirectly, although it appears that in the wider sense Israel's deterrence image suffered the most. Several axioms have been etched in the regional historical memory regarding the image of Israeli power, first and foremost that Israel's ability to employ its military strength has lessened, particularly in the context of its war with an organization operating at a low signature level (a guerilla force fighting from subterranean fortifications and using rocket fire). On the other hand, the IDF's airpower and intelligence abilities were demonstrated clearly, as was Israel's willingness to use its force, and Israel's image as a state that exercises its military strength in disproportionately large measures was enhanced. Nasrallah's statement

that he would not have carried out the kidnapping had he known that Israel would respond in the way it did shows that even an organization such as Hizbollah can be deterred. The war also clearly demonstrated the level of American administration support for Israel.

The deterrence level of the radical elements was likewise tested, and was damaged by Israel's willingness to absorb the rocket barrages launched by Hizbollah and also by the fact that the extent of damage caused by the thousands of rockets fired (around 4,000 according to Israel, 8,000 according to Nasrallah) was far smaller than one might have expected. Moreover, the damage to Lebanon resulting from the Nasrallah-led "escapade" etched in the Lebanese and regional memory the understanding that using force against Israel can incur a high price and thus Hizbollah should not resort to weapons lightly. In this way, the ability of the radical camp to muster the Lebanese arena in future contexts, such as an escalation on the Iranian nuclear issue, has weakened.

On the other hand, Hizbollah emerged as an organization that did not shrink from fighting a superior military force and even to a degree successfully resisted it. Overall, this component appears to be the dominant among the balance of deterrence factors. It clearly reflects the basic asymmetry between the elements in the West that are required to defeat the enemy in order to achieve victory, and the radical parties – particularly the non-state entities – that only have to survive to claim victory. This factor is exploited by the radicals in order to impact on the political mood across the region and to gain credence for their philosophy, which contends that only through sacrifice and willingness to suffer can the inhabitants of the Middle East both quash their enemies that are trying to perpetuate their distress and regain their respect. On this basis, Syria even toyed with the idea of heating up the border on the Golan Heights through low signature warfare, although this does not appear to reflect any real intention in view of its awareness of Israel's strength, which is more relevant in the context of an organized state with a regular army.

The ceasefire and the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon did not end the struggle between the region's camps regarding the war. Instead, the focus shifted from the battlefield to the implementation of resolution 1701 and the internal developments in Lebanon. The strict realization of the resolution would indicate a considerable achievement for the reformist camp. It

would wrest the control of Lebanon from the radicals that they hitherto enjoyed due to the absence of state responsibility; through their power, Lebanon became a base for terror and training personnel as part of the struggle against the West and its regional proxies. Resolution 1701 would enable the reformists to demonstrate an alternative model to the suffering and ongoing struggle in the pursuit of honor proffered by the radicals. This model focuses on enabling inhabitants of the region to seek fulfillment by developing their abilities and taking responsibility for their fate.

To the radical elements, the risk inherent in the Security Council resolution is substantial, and possibly a matter of survival. As such, they are determined to prevent the resolution's implementation at almost all costs. On the other hand, the forces that support the reformists exhausted themselves trying to achieve the Security Council resolution, and though interested in its effective implementation, they did not attach to its implementation the same level of importance that the radicals have attached to its obstruction. Thus the manner in which the war will ultimately impact on the regional balance of power is yet emerging, and the supporters of reform in Lebanon and the region – including Israel and the US – can still influence the end result.

The war accentuated the crucial role of weak and weakened states in the formation of the regional system. Lebanon, and particularly the areas controlled by Hizbollah, is just one example of this reality. Even if each case has its particular attributes, the Palestinian Authority, the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, large parts of Iraq, parts of Yemen, and in a wider sense, certain parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan are similar. The common denominator of all these areas, the lack of control of the central government, is not only a result of the weakness of the government. It is also to a great extent an expression of the radicals' interest to promote the lack of central responsibility as a political alternative to the Western approach. This is an additional component of the effort to turn the Western concept of accountability – which was designed, according to the radical view, to perpetuate Western control of the Muslims' deprivation – into a tool that specifically serves the radicals as a means of advancing their ultimate goal, a change in world order.

The existing world order rests on the logic that every place is subject to the full and sovereign control of some national entity, which, based on its

sovereignty, is exclusively responsible for the events that take place within its territory and in particular for the use of force within its borders – and in a state context, outside as well. When radical elements upset this logic, they are able on the one hand to exploit the lack of state control in order to build up a force that acts against the Western rules of warfare – in other words, employ terror against citizens – and on the other hand, to benefit from the West's commitment to state logic to prevent massive forceful intervention against them by Western forces, as long as they (the radicals) do not go too far. Thus, the United States did not employ massive force against al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan between 1998 and 2001, despite the fact that it was clear that the organization used the area to prepare terror attacks against American targets. Israel too did not carry out an extensive campaign in Gaza and did not act in the areas that were under the full control of the Palestinian Authority (Area A) from the start of the confrontation with the Palestinians in September 2000 until early 2002.

The radical camp, headed by Syria and Iran, is determined to maintain and develop this reality, and has succeeded in doing so even in places where the government is already in the hands of radicals. This was the situation in Lebanon when it was fully controlled by Syria, and this was the situation in the Gaza Strip when Hamas was in government but presented itself as not fully responsible for the acts of terror, even when such acts were performed by its own terror branch, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Battalions. This achievement was largely possible due to the impressive success of the radical parties in inculcating the terminology that they imprinted on the regional political culture. The recognition of terror as national or Islamic resistance, and the full adoption of the concept of lack of responsibility and denial by the pragmatic forces as a means of evading the need to act against terror provided a comfortable basis for the development of areas of non-accountability. Thus, Abu Mazen preferred to deny the responsibility of Islamic Jihad for a series of suicide terror attacks carried out by the organization during 2005, in order to avoid having to confront the organization, even though he was able to do this. The Palestinians also did not act to arrest the killers of the American diplomats in October 2004, even though almost all Palestinian parties condemned the act. Likewise Egypt did not take decisive action to prevent the smuggling of weapons from the Sinai Peninsula to the Gaza Strip and even maintains

ongoing political dialogue with Hamas, which has managed this extensive smuggling operation.

The West – Europe in particular though in no small measure the United States and Israel as well – shares considerable responsibility for the development of this situation. Tolerance of Middle Eastern regimes that generate this reality is tantamount to being a partner in crime. Not only does this tolerance, which reflects a naive belief that apparent stability will prevent empowerment of the radical stream, make it easier for the regimes to adhere to a policy of denial and does not provide them with grounds and strength to change the situation; it also provides evidence for the principal radical arguments whereby the hollow West has lost faith in its values and is not willing to fight for them. Unfortunately for the West, the war in Iraq has turned into a test case that instead of encouraging the West to deal with such problems as it did in Afghanistan, in fact sharpened the reluctance of elements in the West to contend with the problem.

Israel's reactions to the kidnappings of Shalit on the Gaza Strip border and Goldwasser and Regev on the Lebanese border were designed to transmit a message that as far as Israel is concerned, the situation had escalated out of control and Israel did not intend to accept the further cultivation of the idea of non-accountability and the presence of uncontrolled areas along its borders. It appeared that the message was received following the heavy casualties of the Palestinians and the heavy damage in Lebanon, particularly of Hizbollah. However, Israel was also perceived to be hesitant in all aspects of using ground forces to generate fundamental change of the situation and as a result, it was viewed as once again leaving the problem to the local regimes and the international community. One can assume that as long as there is no change in the political culture and the terminology used in the regional political dialogue, and as long as the West desists from discouraging such change through its actions, the radical elements will continue benefiting from the existence of areas that are not subject to state control and accountability.

In this context it is interesting to examine the approach presented by Richard Haass in his article on the end of the era of American influence in the Middle East.¹ The question is: did such an era ever exist? In practice there was an attempt by the United States to exploit the fall of the Soviet Union and the 1991 Gulf War to establish a new reality in the region through a

peace process and a policy of dual containment. However, this attempt did not take hold in the region at any stage: peace remained a distant prospect and did not incorporate acceptance of Israel's right to exist or rejection of terror. Iran continued its process of empowerment and the principal current that garnered strength in the Middle East during this period was radical Islam, which genuinely reflected the feelings of deprivation, jealousy, frustration, and hatred of much of the Middle East towards the United States. The true feature of the period is the struggle between the radical stream and the reformist stream, which includes the pragmatic elements. The war in Lebanon and the war in Iraq reflect the advantages of the radical elements resulting from their willingness to suffer and sacrifice more than the reformists and their supporters in the West. On the other hand, the situation has yet to be decided, and as it has been developing dialectically throughout, one should wait to see how the reformists and the West react to the challenges of the radicals, including the continued killings in Iraq, the assassination of senior members of the Lebanese reformist camp and the rearmament of Hizbollah, ongoing Palestinian terror in the Gaza Strip, the continued nuclearization of Iran, and possibly another mega-terror attack by al-Qaeda.

Note

1. Richard N. Haass, "The New Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 6 (2006): 2-11.