

Can This Be The Last Arab-Israeli War?

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Of all the gruesome and tragic photos of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, one clip remains in my mind; that of an injured boy lying on the ruin of what was his house, raising his hand showing a “V” sign to the camera. Since the boy is so young he may not know what “victory” means. But, seeing his face and his gesture, there is a good chance that he will grow to be an enemy of Israel, maybe a Hezbollah fighter. One wonders why the Israeli leaders do not see this. They should know better than anyone else the processes that have turned tiny organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah into mass-based, powerful political and military forces.



Marchers in Toronto's August 12th demonstration against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon

While Israel was prompted by two separate hostage-takings in Gaza and in southern Lebanon, Israel waged a war as part of its strategy of bringing two regime changes in the region, in Palestine and in Lebanon, which has been longer in planning. And this is part of a larger scheme – in accordance with U.S. strategy – of major regime changes in Syria and Iran. Fully aware of this strategy, and having their own agendas, Iran and Syria, in turn, are directly or indirectly creating problems for Israel and the USA. Syria wants back its occupied territory in the Golan, and the fundamentalist regime in Iran, under its present military/security-backed government of Ahmadinejad, plays the Palestinian card and anti-Zionist rhetoric to divert attention from its internal politics and problems. It used its influence on Hezbollah to fight a proxy war, partly to offset the danger of Iran being attacked by Israel or the United States.

In the past Israel had to deal with Arab states with regular armies. It is now confronted with mass-based irregular armies which are harder to fight. Popular guerrilla armies can easily merge with the population and make it difficult to target them without harming the civilian population, damaging neighbourhoods and infrastructure, and provoking angry public reaction, both domestically and internationally.

The Israeli army, however, has not been bothered about the consequences of this war and counted on the unconditional support of the United States, quiescence of the European governments and the global media. Hence, it waged its hugely disproportionate military operations in Lebanon and in Gaza. A fully-functioning and prosperous country, Lebanon, which had marvelously rebuilt its cities after the disastrous civil war, was reduced to rubble by massive bombardments. Lebanon's infrastructure is gone, hundreds lay dead and hundreds of thousands have been made homeless and turned into refugees. The economy has been brought to a complete standstill. Hezbollah, in turn, using its primitive missiles and mortars, shelled northern Israeli cities and towns and killing civilians, giving more excuses to the Israelis to pound Lebanon.

ISRAELI-U.S. GOALS THWARTED

Israel had the privilege and the world's only superpower's permission to continue the war until it reached the short-term military goal of defeating Hezbollah, and then sign a ceasefire of convenience. It failed to do that. In the process, it further destabilized the region, endangered its own long-term security, and emboldened further religious movements and fundamentalists.

One should not forget that the growth of both of these radical religious organizations is partly a product of Israel's hard-line policies of not ending the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, Golan Heights, and Shebaa Farms, and not moving toward a negotiated settlement and peace.

It is interesting to note that in 2005, Hezbollah, in reaction to the UN demand for disarmament, had in fact agreed to disarm, provided that Israel ended the occupation of Shebaa Farms. (Hezbollah Deputy Leader, Sheikh Naim Kassem interview with *Financial Times*, cited in *Ha'arezt*, 09/04/2005). Hezbollah could in the process become a sort of Hezbollah *Lite*, merging into Lebanese politics, and gradually losing its influence regardless of the pressures of the Iranians and Syrians. In the same manner, Hamas could have become Hamas *Lite* had Israel and the U.S. accepted it as a legitimate elected government. Just before the kidnapping

of the Israeli soldier by its military wing (and the prior Israeli kidnappings in Gaza), the political wing of Hamas was favourably considering the joint Hamas-Fatah Palestinian prisoners' demand of recognizing Israel.

There is no doubt that both Iran and Syria have used and are using Hezbollah to further their own agenda. But if the Israeli occupation of Arab lands ends, prisoners are released, and peace negotiations resume between Israel and its neighbours, Hezbollah would have little reason to continue its military engagement with Israel.

CONFLICTS UNRESOLVED

Far from reaching a resolution, a new era of conflicts and confrontations and regime change is being entered into. Chaos, turmoil and suffering in the Middle East – the inevitable results of complete failure of U.S. foreign policies in the region – rising Islamic fundamentalism, Israeli militarism and fundamentalism and increased political suppression, and extremism have created an explosive and dangerous situation.

It is hard to keep hopes for a peaceful solution amidst increased hostilities and polarization. However, those of us who believe that peace is the only choice and that it is possible to achieve, cannot give up. Anti-war demonstrations throughout the world, including in Tel-Aviv, keep this hope alive.

Militarism will not bring lasting security to Israel, nor will religious fundamentalism bring an independent democratic Palestinian or Lebanese state. Without the support of progressive Israelis, no government in Israel would willingly sign a peace treaty. And without a strong peace movement among Palestinians and Arabs apart from their support of the resistance to occupation, the Israeli peace movement cannot achieve much. The Jewish community and pro-Israelis in the West also need to show some sympathy to the sufferings and the inhuman treatment of the other side. Without strong support for peace among Jews outside Israel, the regional movements for peace will not succeed.

Most importantly, without a major anti-war movement in the West and without pressuring right-wing governments, the Bush administration in the U.S. and its allies, including the present Harper government in Canada, will continue their one-sided policy. The Arab and Muslim communities in the West need to do a better public relations job to gain more support and sympathy of the public and fight racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. While they rally against Israeli occupation, they should not become cheer-leaders for Islamic radicals, who are seeking an Iranian-style Islamic theocratic regime, with its disastrous consequences for Iran, the region and the world.

One of the most astonishing aspects of this Sixth Arab-Israeli war is that it crystallized the naked global racial/religious divide. No other war in recent times has so clearly displayed the depth of racial division around the world. Western governments, including the present Conservative government in Canada, all expressed sympathy for Israel. Even the killing of eight Canadians by Israeli bombs did not shake Stephen Harper's one-sided sympathy. The global media did not even call this a war. It termed it, instead, a "Middle East Crisis," or "Israeli Campaign." This polarized communities

around the world. This is what extremists on both sides favour.

TALLYING THE CEASEFIRE

Although Israel agreed to the ceasefire, it was not the ceasefire of convenience it had hoped for. The Israeli government realized that it had grossly miscalculated the strength of Hezbollah. First it had hoped that massive bombardments would defeat Hezbollah from the air – it did not. Then it assumed sending troops into Lebanon would do the job – this was not accomplished either. The world outrage over the bombardments of Lebanon, particularly the killings in Qana, forced even the Americans to expedite the ceasefire process. Severe and growing casualties of Israeli troops in Lebanon, and Israeli civilians in northern Israel, as a result of failure of the IDF to silence Hezbollah rockets, forced Israel to accept the ceasefire and UNSC Resolution 1701 before "the job was done."

The Sixth Arab-Israeli war had many winners and losers. Any tally must begin from the people who were killed and their surviving families, and then those who lost their homes and sources of income. Over eleven hundred Lebanese were killed, hundreds of thousands lost their houses and businesses, and a million refugees generated. On the Israeli side, hundreds were killed and injured and their houses and businesses damaged.

Politically, the Israeli government of Olmert and the IDF were big losers. Israel could neither get back its two kidnapped soldiers, nor disarm Hezbollah or kill its leaders. The neo-conservatives in the U.S. (and their allies in Canada), who had hoped this proxy war would send a strong message to Iran's Islamic regime, were big losers too. Their militarist strategy for re-shaping the Middle East to U.S. and Israeli plans received another blow.

Obviously, the big winner of this war was Hezbollah, who now displays its effective presence in Southern Lebanon and distributes cash to people who lost their houses, gaining more support as the saviour of Lebanon and the Arab world. Hezbollah will not be disarmed, and it will be a far more powerful force in Lebanese politics and society. This has made the Islamists in the region, and their often short-sighted supporters in the West happy. The Iranian regime is the other big winner of the Lebanon war. Iran has become even more defiant in the pursuit of its nuclear ambitions, possibly paving the way for further catastrophic confrontations and invasions in the region. The Iranian people, political dissidents inside Iran and in prisons, women, workers and youth, are another of the losers of the war. They are already subjected to more brutality and suppression in Iran.

Despite their gains, however, Hezbollah and Iran also need to take in a few hard lessons. While Israel was pounding Hezbollah, the Arab and the majority-Muslim countries were almost totally silent. Not just the conservative governments who disliked and distrusted Hezbollah's radicalism, but also the ordinary people. Even in Palestine, other than few street demonstrations, there were no mass uprisings and the radical government of Hamas also stayed relatively silent.

No doubt Shia-Sunni sectarianism had something to do with this dismal reaction. In an interview with an Iranian paper, Abdallah Safi-eddin, the Hezbollah Ambassador to Iran, was asked about

this silence and he diplomatically tried to dodge the question. The Iranian regime must be fearful that in case of a war with Iran, it may still be standing alone.

The war had collateral damage for several parties as well, among them being the Israeli Labour party. With a prominent union leader at its helm, many had hoped that the Labour party would



play an alternative role vis-à-vis Kadima Party's disastrous policy of unilateralism. Amir Peretz, however, grabbed the defense ministry and when the war started he made sure that the world sees him to be as militarist as any other Israeli hawk.

NECESSARY NEGOTIATIONS

Now with ceasefire temporarily in place, all sides of the conflict are pondering the lessons of this latest Arab-Israeli war. With no attempts at resolving the root causes of the problem, this ceasefire will be fragile and will not achieve much. More than ever, direct negotiations and involvement in the peace process on different fronts seem to be the only solutions to the conflicts in the Middle East.

On the Lebanese/Israeli front, the negotiations should involve ending of occupation of the Shebaa Farms, release of Lebanese prisoners and return of the Israeli hostages, disarming of Hezbollah and its merger as militia with and under the command of Lebanese army.

Since no permanent solution in Lebanon is possible without resolving Syria/Israeli conflict, direct negotiations with Syrians, for ending the occupation of the Golan Heights and its return to Syria, and Syrian guarantees for the security and recognition of

Israel, are pre-conditions for peace and cooperation in the region.

This peace process in turn relates to the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict – the Palestinian issue. Despite past failures of the whole array of peace negotiations, from Madrid to Oslo I and II, to Wye River, Sharm el-Sheikh I and II, Camp David II and Taba, there are components in these negotiations and memoranda that can be used as the basis for a permanent peaceful solution between the two sides. These include, ending of the occupation and enclosures of the West Bank and Gaza, with minor agreed-upon land swaps based on the 1967 border and dismantling of illegal settlements, creation of a viable Palestinian state, Jerusalem as capital of both Israel (in the west) and Palestine (in the east), an agreed-upon resolution of the right of return of Palestinians, and the formal recognition of Israel by the Palestinian state. The informal Geneva Accord of 2003 points to the fact that actual peace between Israelis and Palestinians is not just an illusion. The question is really if parties involved want it.

As for Iran, although not a party in Arab-Israeli conflicts, but because of connections with Hezbollah and Hamas, and because it has emerged as a most influential regional power, it should be involved in direct negotiations to help ease Afghanistan and Iraq problems, and above all find a peaceful solution for its nuclear ambitions. Despite its defiance, the regime has announced that everything, including enrichment programs are open for negotiations. The Iranian government says negotiations first, while the Bush administration says stop enrichment and then negotiate.

No excuse should be given to the oppressive regime in Iran to seek confrontation with the U.S. to divert attention from the serious internal political and economic problems it is facing. Sanctions and invasions will only strengthen the regime and add to the suffering of the Iranian people.

The question is whether the Bush and Blair administrations, the Israeli government and their neo-conservative supporters, including the present Conservative Canadian government, are going to take into consideration the tragic lessons of Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon. Or will they want to try their chances in yet another and a much bigger confrontation, and add Iran to their list of disastrous foreign policy failures? **R**

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