



LEBANON: THE TWO-IN-ONE CRISIS

By Harvey Sicherman

Three weeks of war between Israel and Hezbollah have not yet yielded a decisive result. Yet, it should be clear that this is more than just a nasty border clash. The larger landscape of the Middle East has been illuminated, notably the burgeoning contest between the United States and Iran over the political direction of the region. Between Washington's push for democracy and Tehran's push for theocracy lie monarchies and autocracies who want neither Western-style popular rule nor Shi'ite-Persian domination. Alliances, ideologies, balances of power (including nuclear) and the supply of oil are all at stake. The war for southern Lebanon and northern Israel is not likely to decide this larger crisis but it most decidedly opens a new round.

THE BIG PICTURE: ROUND ONE

The Iranian theocrats empowered since 1979 have always preached that America, the Great Satan, bars the way to a glorious Islamic renaissance led by the purified Persian Shi'a. Aware of the Sunni and Arab rejection of this claim to leadership, Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors latched onto Israel – the little Satan – as the unifying proximate enemy. The war with Iraq in the 1980s, corruption and economic disorder have never entirely diverted the mullahs from this enterprise. Unable to challenge the United States directly, predictably the Iranians resorted to terrorism from the outset. As for Israel, Iran's most successful international enterprise was the alliance with Syria, forged in the 1980s, which enabled them also to create Hezbollah, a subsidized and heavily armed Lebanese Shi'ite militia and social movement able to harm the Israelis directly.

Before 9/11, no American administration had been able to change Iran's fundamental disposition and the absence of diplomatic relations reflected the cold, sometimes hot, war decreed by Tehran. After 9/11, however, President Bush's determination to hold states responsible for terrorism predictably found Iran sharing "evil axis" billing with Iraq and North Korea.

Washington was well aware that the overthrow of the Taliban and Saddam were welcome events for Tehran, an enemy of both. Bush strategists, however, saw the potential multiplier effect of nascent democracies on the highly unpopular theocrats. Regime change in Baghdad would breed regime change elsewhere, including Tehran, and this, in turn, might ease fears that Iran's ostensibly peaceful nuclear energy program hid a quest for nuclear weapons.

The first round of this contest, roughly 2003-2005, went largely the American way. Saddam's overthrow empowered Iraqi Shi'ites, their mentor a long-time critic of the Iranian theocracy, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. And, in the midst of the growing Sunni insurgency, one of Iran's favored militia, the Mahdi Army led by Muqtada al-Sadr, suffered serious defeat in a premature revolt against the American forces in spring 2004.

There were other reverses. Yasser Arafat, whose relations with Washington had been fatally damaged when he was caught importing Iranian arms in early 2002, died November 11, 2004. Two months later, Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) was elected on a platform to end the second intifada with Israel. Worse yet was the "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon. On September 2, 2004, France and the United States combined to get Resolution 1559 passed by the U.N. Security Council, demanding the departure of Syrian forces controlling Lebanon and the disarmament of militia, especially Hezbollah, popularly credited with driving the Israelis out of southern Lebanon in 2000. Following the murder of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, popular protests compelled the Syrians to withdraw their troops and Hezbollah's support for Syria isolated it after a new Lebanese legislature was elected in early summer. Finally, above all, Iran had been forced to suspend nuclear enrichment on November 14, 2004, when an eighteen-year-old secret program had been discovered by the IAEA. This crucial step began the torturous negotiations to control Iranian nuclear activity.

THE BIG PICTURE: ROUND TWO

Thus, as late as the middle of 2005, the American bet on the multiplier effect seemed to be paying off. This high tide of U.S. influence, however, receded rapidly thereafter. Within a year's time, Washington found itself on the defensive nearly

everywhere.

In many respects, it was the “reverse multiplier.” Iraq seemed to sink under the accumulated weight of squabbling politicians and blundering military strategies, none of which were ever supported by sufficient U.S. forces. While the United States concentrated on elections, constitutions, training Iraqi soldiers and a fitful infrastructure improvement, the Shiite militia infiltrated the police. Sadr rebuilt his forces. Under Iranian tutelage, an unofficial Islamic regime in Basra took shape under British noses. Despite Sadr’s political platform – expelling the Americans and imposing Iranian-style theocracy – he was allowed to run a slate as part of the Shiite alliance, and he provided the single-vote victory for the renomination of the ineffective incumbent, Ibrahim al-Jaafari.

It took the United States and the other Iraqi parties four months to dislodge Jaafari, overcoming determined Iranian influence, reportedly including death threats. But this was too late. When Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian jihadist aiming to foment civil war in Iraq, exploded the Samarra Shrine Mosque, Sadr’s militia indulged in an orgy of Sunni bloodletting.

President Bush, already at the bottom of the polls, resolved to hold on with the new prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, no friend of the Iranians. Both were buoyed by the killing of Zarqawi. But the slow, difficult progress depicted by the Administration had now become one last best chance to avoid the complete breakdown of the Iraqi state.

While this danger loomed, further west in the Palestinian territories, Abu Mazen’s authority withered. Unable to establish order in his own Fatah party or to dispel resentment against corruption, the Palestinian leader received little credit for the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005. Instead, the Muslim Brotherhood branch known as Hamas, its specialty suicide bombing, was hailed as the true authors of the Israeli departure. To its own and general surprise, the movement won legislative council elections in January 2006, effectively taking over the Palestinian Authority. In return for a *hudna* or temporary cease-fire with Israel, Hamas had been allowed to run in elections on a platform antithetical to the very political agreement – the Oslo Accords – that legitimized the vote. Now in power, Hamas’ refusal to recognize Israel, renounce terrorism and respect previous Palestinian Authority commitments brought upon the Palestinians a tightening economic and political squeeze. For the United States, as Russian President Putin said, this turn of events was “a sharp blow.”

The Lebanese situation was no better. Syria, bruised by withdrawal, relied upon its secret police and selective assassination of its Lebanese opponents to intimidate further action against its chosen agent, President Emile Lahoud, while it stalled the international investigation into the Hariri murder. Skillfully playing Lebanese politics, the Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah paralyzed the new government, led by Hariri’s protege, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, until he won two seats in the cabinet and an exemption from U.N. Resolution 1559. On February 2, 2006, Siniora reclassified Hezbollah as a “national resistance” movement rather than a militia. The Cedar Revolution had fallen short of sweeping away Syria’s and Iran’s biggest investment.

Iran, too, conducted an election. A younger firebrand, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, defeated the veteran corruptionist Rafsanjani in a lightly voted and heavily manipulated poll. The new president had one big advantage over his softer-talking predecessor. Oil was selling for \$68 a barrel compared to \$26 in 2003. Ahmadinejad soon angered and astonished his would-be European interlocutors by denying the Holocaust, advocating Israel’s destruction, and condemning the West. His domestic platform promised populist redistribution of the wealth. Although by no means the real power in Tehran – that belonged to Ayatollah Ali Khameni – Ahmadinejad’s behavior reflected the regime’s confidence that it could go its own way on the nuclear and other issues and pay no price for it. On February 7, 2006, Ahmadinejad presided over a national festivity resuming enrichment, taunting an international coalition including the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China to do anything about it. The Europeans, with U.S. support, gave Iran a new, better offer to halt enrichment on June 6, 2006, but Tehran refused to respond.

This round had gone clearly to Iran. Despite negotiation, carrots and intermittent American threats, Tehran had defied them all. It was a revival of 1979 but this time with a nuclear edge. Such was the big picture on the eve of the Israel-Hezbollah war.

THE LITTLE PICTURE: AN OVER AND UNDER PROBLEM

In May 2000, Israel withdrew from an 18-year occupation of southern Lebanon intended to secure its border against attacks -- first by the PLO, then later by Hezbollah. Although advertised as a unilateral move, it was, in fact, quite multilateral, relying on U.N. certification of Israel’s northern border and the Lebanese government’s assumption of sovereign control over it. Israel got the U.N. certificate but Lebanon never exercised the control.

Despite threats of massive retaliation, Hezbollah lost little time in asserting its right to attack certain Israeli positions. It forced the government of Lebanon to declare that the so-called Shabaa Farms area, thought to be Syrian, belonged in fact to Lebanon, despite the absence of documentation of the transfer and Syria’s reluctance to recognize Lebanese sovereignty. The U.N. did not recognize the Lebanese claim. Nonetheless, in October 2000, Hezbollah raided the “farms,” in plain view of a U.N. observation post, and netted three Israeli soldiers; later an Israeli businessman was also kidnapped. Nasrallah announced his readiness to swap prisoners. Finally, on November 6, 2003, the German government brokered such a deal, which exchanged, on the dead side, three Israeli soldiers for forty Hezbollah fighters and, on the living side, one Israeli businessman for 430 Hezbollah, Lebanese Shiite, Jordanian and Palestinian prisoners. This was not exactly massive retaliation.

The Sharon-led government was clearly unwilling to open a second front while the Palestinian intifada raged and the United States invaded Iraq. This gave Hezbollah its own leeway not only to continue with dozens of attacks (including rocket fire), but also to build an arsenal of Katyusha short-range, Iranian long-range, and Syrian mid-range missiles, the latter reflecting Syria's decision to include southern Lebanon in its defense perimeter. Northern Israel's peace was punctuated by occasional attacks and shadowed by Hezbollah's growing arsenal. Hezbollah soldiers, trained by Iran and Syria, were digging in, and also digging under the border.

Meanwhile, the situation on the Palestinian front had deteriorated sharply following the election of the new Hamas government. Unwilling to meet international conditions for international financial aid or negotiations with Israel, new Prime Minister Ismail Haniya had one advantage to play with Israel and the United States, namely, the cease-fire that allowed Hamas participation in the Palestinian elections in the first place. In the Middle East, cease-fire means many things but unfortunately it hardly ever means a complete cessation of fire. Just as Yasser Arafat had used Hamas to keep up military pressure on Israel, so Hamas used Islamic Jihad, a small gang in the pay of Syria and Iran, to continue the bombardment of Israeli Negev towns and even the coastal city of Ashkelon with Qassam rockets. Unlike Arafat or Abu Mazen, however, the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority publicly congratulated both the Qassam rocketeers and suicide bombers. Israel, in turn, continued its campaign of assassinating Jihad leaders and disrupting terrorist activities, some of which involved Fatah and Hamas. A cease-fire with such exemptions, like the one with Lebanon, was obviously vulnerable to both sensational incidents and the cumulative effects of violence.

Thus, Israel's withdrawals had not solved the "over and under" problem. Instead of secure frontiers, the Palestinians in the south and Hezbollah in the north were extending operations both over the border (rockets) and under it (tunnels). It was a low-level, and occasionally higher level, war of attrition, its purpose the eventual destruction of Israel, a goal shared by Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah, Sunni and Shiite alike.

On March 28, 2006, Israel elected a new coalition government led by the Kadima party, the disabled Sharon's last political legacy. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (Kadima), Defense Minister Amir Peretz (Labor), and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni (Kadima) were younger politicians inexperienced in war and diplomacy. Their main offering, a West Bank version of the Gaza withdrawal, was already obsolete. Americans, Egyptians, Jordanians, and Europeans urged Olmert not to replicate the increasingly violent chaos of Gaza, a view reinforced by the Qassam fire.

Then, on June 25, 2006, the Hamas military wing used a tunnel months in the making to surprise an Israeli post on the Gaza border, abducting a wounded soldier named Gilad Shalit. The abductors demanded the release of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. The moment was most awkward for the Palestinians: Abu Mazen and Haniya were negotiating a formula for coexistence ("the Prisoners' Document") that had been concocted by Hamas and Fatah prisoners held by Israel, in the hope of ending violence between the two factions in Gaza.

Olmert demanded Shalit's release and backed his demands by attacking various strongpoints in Gaza, tightening the siege and arresting many Hamas legislators. Following a fresh barrage of Qassams, Israel broadened the operation with a land assault into the northern part of Gaza.

A curious and disturbing thing then occurred. Egypt, which along with some other Arab states, did not want Hamas to succeed but preferred to smother rather than strangle it, proposed a deal. Even before the June 25 incident, at a meeting of Nobel Laureates in Jordan, Olmert had offered to release some prisoners to Abu Mazen; the Egyptians suggested that this should now follow the return of Shalit and an improved cease-fire to exclude Qassams and assassinations. It was vetoed not by the Hamas government but rather by the group's leader-in-exile, Khaled Meshaal, resident in Damascus.

On July 12, Hezbollah trumped Hamas' feat. After penetrating the border fence, an ambush yielded three dead and two abducted Israeli soldiers; a pursuing tank hit a landmine and four more were killed. Meanwhile, Hezbollah also fired Katyusha rockets at Israeli towns and military bases. Nasrallah had announced months earlier his desire to free three Lebanese prisoners (one, Samir Kuntar, a PLO terrorist captured in 1979 for the murder of an Israeli man and his four-year-old daughter). Now he enlarged the demand to include Palestinian prisoners, as in the 2004 swap.

Suddenly, the Palestinian issue had been hijacked by Meshaal then by Nasrallah, both patronized by Syria and Iran. Arafat's most precious legacy, Palestinian independence from the vetoes of other states, had been lost. Vital decisions were being made not in Ramallah but in Damascus and Tehran.

Just as suddenly, the Olmert government was confronted by failure north and south. The Hezbollah terrorists who usually targeted civilians had taken on the IDF, Israel's ultimate deterrent, while Israel appeared to be stymied by the rocket threat. And the Palestinian non-partner had mutated into a Syrian or Iranian veto. Thus, the "over and under" problem on both fronts translated into dramatically increased Israeli vulnerability.

TIMED DIPLOMACY

On July 13, Israel began an air offensive with a surprise attack on long-range missile targets and reinforcement/resupply points such as the Beirut airport, key roads, and bridges. Lebanon was blockaded. Olmert announced Israel's demands: return of the soldiers and enforcement of U.N. Resolution 1559 -- namely, Lebanese control over the border and the disarming of Hezbollah.

The Israelis clearly saw Hezbollah's action as the culmination of challenges to their security that required a severe retaliation. As Olmert told the Knesset, "Enough is enough!" But Nasrallah did not. On July 26, two weeks into the war, he admitted to *Al Jazeera* that he had expected no more than a brief retaliation and perhaps a counter kidnapping, as had happened before. To his further surprise, neither the Arab states nor even his Lebanese political partners rallied to the cause. Egypt and Jordan called Hezbollah reckless; even Saudi Arabia denounced "rash adventures carried out by elements inside the state without consultation with the legitimate authority." Nasrallah had to defend himself against Lebanese critics that he had been exempted from Resolution 1559 only in return for a pledge of quiet on the border, arguing that unlike Shabaa Farms, the "suffering of the prisoners" justified kidnapping, even war.

Israel had more than regional support for its retaliation. Hezbollah attacked Israel the day the Group of Eight met in St. Petersburg. It was Russian President Putin's "coming out" party, celebrating the restored imperial splendor of the Tsarist capital and, through the booming oil market, Moscow's newfound assertiveness. Neither Hezbollah nor Hamas qualified as terrorists in Putin's view, possibly because they had never attacked Russians. He denounced the attack but also criticized Israel's "disproportionate" use of force, a curious comment from the destroyer of Chechnya. The Russians would not be too disturbed, however, by a setback for Iran, whose leaders had rejected Putin's compromise to settle the nuclear impasse.

Some observers even saw in Hezbollah's actions an Iranian plan to disrupt the coalition gathering at the U.N. after Tehran's refusal to answer the latest European offer on the nuclear issue. If so, then Nasrallah proved too clever by half. For, if the Israeli operation devastated Hezbollah, then Iran's twenty-year investment would be lost and, with it, its forward retaliation against a U.S. or Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities. And, on July 31, not distracted by Lebanon, the U.N. Security Council did issue a resolution, albeit without sanctions, demanding an Iranian halt to reprocessing.

Thus, the United States, Israel, and a host of other states opposed to Iranian pretensions had a stake in the swift ruin of Hezbollah. It would help to reverse American regional fortunes and perhaps become a building block for a broader anti-Iranian coalition. Washington found in St. Petersburg general agreement that no cease-fire should be reached before the sponsors could be sure of decisive change from the previous status quo – namely, a newly secure border for Israel and Lebanon free of the Hezbollah missiles. An open mike at the G-8 Summit caught President Bush also expressing the desire to pressure Syria.

Everything depended on the timing. The parameters of U.S. action were clear enough. Let the Israelis deprive Hezbollah of its military clout as quickly and cleanly as possible, thereby administering a large defeat to Syria and Iran. As that moment approached, when Damascus and Tehran had to decide whether to raise the stakes or to accept Hezbollah's defeat, Bush might launch a blend of sweets and sour at Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that would loosen his alliance with Iran and Hezbollah. Lebanon's Cedar Revolution could then be completed. Simultaneously, the Palestinians would see the logic of recovering their independence from Damascus and Tehran, severing their cause from Hezbollah.

"SHOCK AND AWE"

None of these prizes could be secured, however, until Hezbollah was clearly seen to be losing, and losing before Lebanon was engulfed by a humanitarian crisis. The Olmert government, however, placed its military bets on an air campaign that would spare Israel the casualties inherent in a large ground action. It resembled the Pentagon's "shock and awe" assault at the outset of the Iraq invasion, doing heavy but not decisive damage. Israel's leaders had not absorbed the real dimensions of the missile threat, thousands of which dislocated a million people in the north, including the Haifa industrial zone. Nor did Israel's military chiefs grasp the enemy on the ground. Over six years Hezbollah had become a well-trained extension of the Iranian military, not just a hit-and-run terror group. It was equipped with sophisticated Iranian and Syrian arms (including anti-ship and anti-tank missiles), and deeply dug in.

Just as significantly, any attack against forces using civilians as targets and shields would mean a high toll of "dual-use" infrastructure (airports, bridges, roads) and inevitably, some deadly mistakes, such as the bombing of a U.N. observer post. There were many who wished Israel to lick Hezbollah on the quick before Lebanon was wrecked but few who would countenance the wrecking of Lebanon before Hezbollah was licked.

Thus, when Secretary of State Rice arrived at an international conference of European and Arab states in Rome (July 25-27), the Israeli military action appeared already overripe. The air strikes and hesitant ground probes were producing images of successful Hezbollah resistance and displacing hundreds of thousands. Three days later came the blundering Israeli air attack on an apartment building in Qana. Amid the collateral damage was the remnant of the international coalition supporting Israel. When Israel finally launched a reinforced ground operation, it was already too late for maximum political benefit.

NEXT ROUND

A familiar situation is now shaping up: Israel and the United States backed into one corner sometimes helped by European allies but often not; the Russians playing sides, depending on their scent for victory; the pro-American Arab governments aflame with self-protecting humanitarianism; Iran and Hezbollah playing to the "street's" thirst for revenge. Sunnis will be out to top the Shiites, and the Shiites around the region, including those in Iraq, will be tempted to endorse Iran.

Once more, the Bush Administration had to work the U.N. Security Council for a resolution, and once again, its main interlocutor was France. Any agreement, however, had hard standards to meet. Should Hezbollah be deprived of its control

over southern Lebanon and be unable to rearm, it (and Iran) would be seen as the loser once the shouting over its military virility subsided. But a multinational force that allowed Hezbollah to return – and rearm – would negate both Israeli and U.S. interests, not to speak of those opposed to Iranian influence.

Pending a dramatic military event, then, the outlook for the “two-in-one” crisis is for a “two-in-one” decision. The prisoners and Shabaa Farms aside, both sides will claim strategic victory with reason: Nasrallah that Hezbollah held out and hurt Israel badly; Israel that Hezbollah lost its best launching points and much of its arsenal. But there are other consequences, too. The other Lebanese politicians will have to fasten new restraints on Hezbollah, the alternative being a Shiite-led dictatorship. Israel will have to surmount the “over and under” problem and find a better balance between its high tech and boots on the ground. And if Hezbollah proved that it could stand and fight, Israel showed that it was not as Nasrallah once put it, a “spider web” society that would collapse at the touch.

For the United States, this third round opening will count as an opportunity missed and a reality exposed. Washington will probably be able to retain a diplomatic coalition against the Iranian nuclear project, and if Hezbollah loses much of its military bite, Tehran may feel more vulnerable. Still, in the absence of a clear-cut Israeli victory, the United States will find it hard to gain political momentum from these events. The Lebanese problem is now added to the Palestinian one, and both of these to Iraq. Inevitably, a “two-in-one” decision invites further Arab hedging at U.S. expense. This will be acute in the Palestinian case: will they separate their case from Lebanon or cede a veto to Syria and Iran?

Washington should also ponder the several political and military lessons to be drawn from these events.

1. **ELECTIONS AREN'T DEMOCRACY:** Elections without qualification only enable the enemies of democracy to exploit it. Hamas, Hezbollah, and Sadr all were allowed to run despite their repudiation of the political structure (Oslo, acceptance of U.N. Resolution 1559, the Iraqi Constitution) under which the polls were held. All three produced war or increased sectarian violence not long after they assumed leading roles. We need no more such experiments. Democracy needs rules, too. Legitimacy derives not only from voters but also from platforms.
2. **NEW DOCTRINE FOR A NEW ENEMY:** Hezbollah has been revealed as a social-political movement, attached to a professional military force using combined terrorist and guerrilla tactics. Current Western military doctrine privileges air and armor. But firepower alone will not do the job in urban areas. Worse, the inevitable civilian toll, magnified by the media, diminishes public support. The United States and its allies must gird themselves to deal with Hezbollah-like tactics. This “asymmetrical” attrition warfare is what gives the enemy its confidence that they can prevail over the long haul whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon or the Palestinian territories. It is rooted in a view of western societies, including Israel, as too decadent to defend themselves for very long once the casualties mount, where the home front is almost more important than the war front. America's failure to employ sufficient forces in Iraq and now Israel's over-reliance on air power, reinforces this conviction.
3. **PROXY WAR IS NOT ENOUGH:** The trouble with proxy war is always the proxies, whose capabilities and interests may not be sufficient or coincide with American wishes. By definition, the main troublemakers go unscathed. Kinder and gentler regimes in Syria and Iran are not likely anytime soon. Until then, the United States must contrive a more effective mix of reward and penalty that offers direct pain to Damascus and Tehran, or should they change policy, direct benefit. Diplomatic, economic, and military policies must march together to exploit vulnerabilities. The war of attrition is available to both sides.

These lessons should survive the “two-in-one” crisis even if the Israeli-Hezbollah war of 2006 does not give a decisive turn to the larger impending confrontation between the United States and Iran.

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