

The Israeli-Islamist War

Martin Kramer

Who won the summer war between Israel and Hizbullah?

Right after the ceasefire, Hizbullah and its Iranian patrons declared the war a “divine victory,” and the *Economist* concurred, running this headline across its cover: “Nasrallah Wins the War.” Israel sank into a funk of self-recrimination.

But a few weeks later, Hizbullah leader Hasan Nasrallah admitted that if he had it to do again, he would have avoided provoking Israel in the first place. Now it was the turn of Israel’s government to claim victory. *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer chimed in, claiming that Hizbullah “was seriously set back by the war,” and *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman called it a “devastating defeat”—for Hizbullah.

The question of who got the upper hand will remain contested. But the debate over who won and who lost obscures the deeper significance of the summer war. It marks the beginning of the third stage in the conflict over Israel.

An evolving conflict

In the first stage, from Israel’s creation in 1948 through 1973, rejection of Israel dressed itself as pan-Arab nationalism. In the classic Arab-Israeli conflict, Arab states formed alliances in the name of Arab unity, with the aim of isolating Israel and building an Arab coalition that could wage war on two or more fronts.

The fatal flaw of this strategy lay in the weakness of pan-Arabism itself. The failure to coordinate led Arab states to humiliating defeats in the multi-front Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967. In 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a coordinated Arab assault on Israel, with partial success. But Egypt then opted out of the Arab collective by reaching a separate peace with Israel in 1979, and the Arab-Israeli conflict came to an end.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict took its place. In this second stage, the Palestine Liberation Organization used a mix of politics and “armed struggle” to open up new fronts against Israel—in Jordan and Lebanon in the heyday of the *fedayeen*, in the West Bank and Gaza in the first *intifada*, and in Israel proper in the second.

But the Palestinian struggle also stalled as the PLO grew sclerotic, inefficient, and corrupt. Its transformation into the ramshackle Palestinian Authority only amplified its weaknesses. The death of its leader Yasir Arafat in 2004 effectively marked the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the third and present stage, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been superseded by the Israeli-Islamist conflict.

There had always been an Islamist component to the “resistance” against Israel, but it had traditionally played a supporting role, first to the Arab states, and then to the PLO. It was Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the Islamist revolution in Iran, who pioneered an entirely different vision of the role Islamism should play opposite Israel.

Khomeini rejected the view that Israel had become a *fait accompli* and thereby entitled a place in the region. He believed that Islam had the power to call forth the sacrifice and discipline needed to deny legitimacy to Israel and ultimately defeat it.

To achieve that goal, Islamists could not rest content with a supporting role; they had to push their way to the front. By establishing Hizbullah as an armed vanguard in Lebanon, Khomeini sought to open a new Islamist front against Israel, independent of weak Arab states and the ineffective PLO.

In the 1990s, Islamist movements gained ground across the Middle East. A Palestinian Islamist movement, Hamas, filled the vacuum left by the PLO’s incompetence. Hizbullah waged a successful campaign to end the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon. But while Islamists rejected peace with Israel and called for “resistance,” they could not challenge the prerogative of the Arab states and the PLO to make grand strategy toward Israel.

That is, until this past year.

The Islamist moment

Two developments have put the Islamists in the driver’s seat. First, Palestinian elections last winter carried Hamas to power in the West Bank and Gaza. Hamas has regarded the elections as a mandate not merely to substitute good government for PLO corruption, but to bend Palestinian strategy to the Islamist vision of gradual attrition of Israel.

Second, Iran’s nuclear drive under President Ahmadinejad has revitalized the idea that Israel can be confronted on the external front.

The possible combination of Iranian nukes, Hizbullah rockets, and Hamas “resistance” has electrified the Arab-Muslim world. Might the forces of Islamism, acting in concert, achieve the victory that eluded Arab states and the PLO? Might they make it possible, once more, to wage a multi-front offensive against Israel? Might an Islamist coalition achieve greater success, by tapping the self-sacrificial spirit of Islam?

This summer brought the Islamist coalition into play against Israel in a multi-front war for the first time. It was not the war Iran would have chosen: Iranian strategy would have deployed the coalition at a moment of Iran’s own choosing, perhaps closer to the make-or-break point in Tehran’s nuclear plans. But Israel preferred to meet the challenge early, launching a preemptive war against Hizbullah’s missiles, rockets, and infrastructure.

Paradoxically, Israel was not fully prepared for the war it launched; Hizbullah, surprised by the outbreak of war, was nevertheless ready for it. The media then hyped those analysts who drew extravagant conclusions from Israel's hesitant performance. Viewers of one American network could hear a gushing consultant declare: "Hizbullah is a powerhouse... Hizbullah delivers the goods... Hizbullah has proven its muscles... Israel is a paper tiger after all... The rules of the Arab-Israeli conflict will have changed for good." Of course, it would be easy to make the opposite case, beginning with the new rules in Lebanon that constrain Hizbullah.

Strengths and weaknesses

The verdict is still out—this has been the cautious refrain of the most serious analysts. But the war does offer some glimpse into the possible character of the Israeli-Islamist conflict, by showing the intrinsic strengths and weaknesses of the Islamist coalition.

The Islamist coalition is strong in areas of ideological discipline and leadership authority. The ideology purports to be "authentic," and efficiently mobilizes pent-up resentments against Israel and the West. The leaders personify a spirit of defiance that is overvalued in their societies, and they command nearly total obedience. Training is exacting; everyone follows orders; no one surrenders.

The Islamist coalition also brings together a flexible mix of assets, comprised as it is of a state actor (Iran), a quasi-state actor (Hamas), and a sub-state actor (Hizbullah). They have developed innovative weapons systems, from suicide bombings to rockets, which go around and under Israel's conventional military strengths.

And if Iran were to acquire missile-launched nuclear weapons, they would transform Israel's small size from an advantage (short lines of defense and supply) into a liability (total vulnerability to one strike). An Iranian nuclear weapon could transform the Israeli-Islamist conflict into a much more dangerous game, in which periodic nuclear-alert crises could bring about the economic, political, and demographic attrition of Israel.

But the Islamist coalition also has weaknesses. First, its backbone is Shiite. Some Sunnis, including Islamists, see the coalition as a threat to traditional Sunni primacy, as much as it is a threat to Israel. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has mobilized against the Iranian-led coalition, which makes it more difficult for the coalition to keep Sunni Islamists in its orbit. And while the coordination between Iran and Hizbullah is total, Hamas has its own strategy, which reflects its own predicament and the constraints imposed by its Arab patrons.

The other major weakness of the Islamist coalition is its lack of direct access to Israel's borders. The unmarked turf between Israel and the West Bank has been closed off by Israel's separation barrier to the detriment of Hamas. In the summer war, Hizbullah lost its exclusive control of Lebanon's border with Israel, arguably the most significant strategic outcome of the war. Without access to Israel's borders, the Islamist coalition cannot conduct a sustained war of attrition against Israel. Moreover, if the coalition uses

its rocket arsenal (its remaining offensive capability), it effectively licenses Israel to retaliate with devastating force.

Absent nuclear weapons, the Islamist coalition is thus likely to remain blocked, unless and until it includes an Arab state that neighbors Israel. Syria is an obvious candidate for that role, but its present leadership acts as an ally of the coalition, and not a full-fledged member in it. There are Islamist political movements in Egypt and Jordan that would eagerly join the coalition, but they are presently kept at bay by moderate regimes.

Given these limitations, the Israeli-Islamist conflict is still far from defining the “new Middle East.” But it could come to define it, if the United States allows the Islamist coalition to gain more military and political power. If the United States stops Iran’s nuclear drive, and bolsters moderate Arab rulers against their Islamist opponents, the summer of 2006 may be remembered as the first Israeli-Islamist war—and the last. If not, more wars will almost certainly follow.

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