

A Polarized Middle East Will Remain Volatile for Years to Come

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The month-long war between Israel and Lebanon has inflicted severe human and material damage on the two countries - but the political phase of this contest that has now started will send out ripples that will be felt throughout the Middle East and perhaps the world. The most important political consequences of the Israel-Lebanon clashes will reflect the fundamental political polarization that is most dramatically seen in Lebanon, but that defines trends throughout the entire region. Three simultaneous circles of polarization and confrontation should be appreciated.

The first is that between official governments and non-state actors in the Arab world. As governments have lost credibility and impact in recent decades, the vacuum has been filled by political parties and armed resistance groups, of which Hizbullah is the most impressive to date. Its historic successes in driving Israel out of Lebanon in 2000 and fighting it to a draw in 2006 will stimulate other like-minded movements in the region to emulate its organizational and political prowess. Tensions will increase throughout the region between worried governments and emboldened opposition movements.

Inside Lebanon itself in the coming months, Hizbullah will find itself locked in a profound political struggle with those forces that want to disarm it. That contest will be only a microcosm of the wider struggle in the region between the legitimacy of the state and the counter-legitimacy of Islamist and resistance movements that feel they respond more effectively to their citizens' needs and rights.

The second polarization is between countries and political forces within the region that are waging a regional cold war for the political identity of the Middle East. Syria and Iran, along with groups like Hizbullah, Hamas, the Moslem Brotherhood and others, are actively challenging the more conservative, often pro-Western states like Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Egypt. This contest will continue to simmer for many years. It is intimately linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the more militant or even "revolutionary" and Islamist parties confronting Israel while the moderate and traditionally pro-Western countries take a more relaxed position. One of the reasons for the rise of non-state parties and armed resistance groups in Lebanon and Palestine is precisely because the long-reigning Arab governments in the region have failed miserably either to make war or peace with Israel.

The third circle of polarization goes beyond the Middle East, and is focused around the American pressure on Iran to stop its plans to develop a full nuclear fuel cycle. If nuclear issues form the core of this contestation, the wider struggle is about the ideological, social and economic orientation of the Middle East region. The Iranian-Syrian-Hizbullah-led camp sees itself fighting back against Israeli and American hegemony in the region, while the United States, closely allied with Israel, for its part speaks openly about creating a "new" Middle East of societies closely linked to Western

values and interests. Hizbullah's leader Hassan Nasrallah has explicitly stated in recent television addresses that his group fought Israel in part to prevent Lebanon from permanently becoming part of American plans for a new Middle East.

These three circles of polarization intersect very sharply in Lebanon and especially in Hizbullah's multiple roles as a political party, anti-occupation resistance group and Islamist movement that sees itself as part of a wider regional identity. The severe mutual attacks during the 34-day Lebanon war - the longest such war Israel has ever had to fight since its birth in 1948 - are the harbinger of the sort of political intensity the region will witness in the years ahead.

Islamist movements throughout the Middle East will take heart and lessons from Hizbullah's performance, and are likely to challenge incumbent governments more directly in the political arena, through elections but also in civil society activities like the media and youth groups. Hizbullah and Hamas are the two leading Islamist resistance movements in the region, and their fate will have a major influence on how other such political and social movements develop.

Hizbullah has emerged from the war with stronger political support throughout Arab public opinion, but greater opposition among governments. It has started to shift the center of gravity of its identity and political constituency from its military resistance to Israel to its political engagement in Lebanon. One reason for this is the dawning appreciation that this was a war that Hizbullah could wage only one time, to prove its capabilities and political will, which it did rather emphatically. If it happens again, though, Lebanon will be destroyed, literally burned by Israeli fire.

Hizbullah would not be destroyed, and it will regroup and fight again, perhaps with more destructive power that penetrates deeper into Israel. But Lebanon would become a wasteland, a biblical desolation. Like Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis, Lebanon would be burned and left to smolder as an eternal reminder to all generations to come of the utter devastation that people or states can expect as their fate if they challenge Israel's army, threaten Israel's security, or defy Washington too often. Israel would willingly wage such war over and over again, against Syria and perhaps Iran, possibly in collusion with the United States. Some in Washington relish such destruction and chaos in Arab and Islamic lands, feeling that only a sustained frontal assault on the prevailing Arab political culture can break the mould that has defined many of our violent lands in modern times.

Afghanistan and Iraq are examples of this approach. Palestine is halfway there. Lebanon is a candidate for political oblivion, and has just had its warning. The message of Israel's attack and siege of Beirut is simple: Those who thought they could transform Beirut -- the Paris of the Middle East -- into its Hanoi would only end up seeing it turned into Mogadishu, the shattered capital of a failed and wayward Somali state, fought over by alternating gangs and warlords and forgotten by the world. Hizbullah cannot wage this war again, and must now shift to building on the gains it has made through political engagement, inside Lebanon and around the region. It has not signaled the direction or

tone of its political plans, but the signs of the past month indicate that it will reorient its energies to domestic Lebanese politics - if Lebanon, Israel, the US and others allow it to do so. I see no other interpretation of the five significant decisions Hizbullah has made since early August: accepting Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's 7-point peace plan, accepting the Lebanese government decision to send the army to the southern border region, accepting UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and its call for a beefed up UN force in southern Lebanon, energetically repopulating and rebuilding the mainly Shiite civilian areas that had been bombed and evacuated during the war, and calling for a new government of national unity in which it and its allies would play a major role.

Hizbullah claims, with some credibility, that it has forced Israel and the international community to address the issues that matter for Lebanon, such as Shabaa Farms, prisoners, and cross-border attacks. The UN-mandated political process in Resolution 1701 offers a route to resolve those issues. It could, if successful, even reinvigorate a regional conflict-resolution process that is anchored in law, and driven by negotiations, rather than emotionalism, and desolation.

Such a development relies in part on an unknown but important element: the standing of the United States in the region. The US in many ways was marginalized in the recent war -- supporting and supplying Israel but unable to engage the Arabs in serious diplomacy. Condoleezza Rice was told by the Lebanese prime minister not to come to Beirut at one point unless she was prepared to push for an immediate cease-fire. She went home instead. The Saudi Arabian leadership issued a rare public statement admonishing the US and Israel, and reminding the world that the Arabs had a war option alongside their peace offer to Israel. Washington's standing in the region will remain clouded for some time - unless the US suddenly reverses policy and adopts a more balanced position in the Arab-Israeli conflict, actively engages as an impartial mediator in the quest for a negotiated peace, and winds down its neo-con-driven military forays into the region to change regimes and remake nations. Critics of the United States have not hesitated to point out that last year it heralded Lebanon as a model of its freedom-promotion strategy in the Arab world, while this year Washington actively supported Israel's widespread destruction of Lebanon's airports, roads, bridges and power plants. Relying on Washington, many Arabs now feel, is a reckless and desperate endeavor. The four countries where the US has intervened recently to promote freedom and democracy - Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon - are now in bad or desperate shape, plagued by active wars and disintegrating state systems in many cases.

The Lebanon-Israel war highlighted the linkages that exist among many of the conflicts or political confrontations in the region. The continued tensions between the US and Iran keep becoming more acute, Iraq simmers in its own problems, Lebanon and its testy ties with Syria remain volatile, and the Arab-Israeli conflict moves in and out of center-stage. One of the important potential developments of the Lebanon-Israel war has been the heightened appreciation of how the unresolved Palestine issue impacts on Arab public opinion and therefore on these conflicts. An increasing number of political analysts and officials seem to recognize the need to resolve the Palestine-Israel conflict in order to move towards peace and stability in the region as a whole.

This will also create new tensions in the months and years ahead, as the growing power of Islamist movements such as Hizbullah and Hamas runs up against the desire of more moderate Arab states to explore signing peace agreements with Israel - if Israel finally accepts to withdraw from all the lands occupied in 1967 and live alongside a viable Palestinian state. In exploring how to move ahead in view of the linkages between the many conflicts in the Middle East, two options seem to prevail. The first is to try and solve them all in a great package deal that touches on Iran's nuclear power, Israeli peace agreements with Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, winding down the foreign presence and the violence in Iraq, and sorting out Lebanon's internal issues and its ties with Syria. The second is to address the issues sequentially, building on the gains of each successive agreement.

This could see the cease-fire in south Lebanon followed by a full Israeli withdrawal, and exchange of prisoners and a permanent end of hostilities, capped by an Israeli withdrawal from Shabaa Farms. Resolving the bilateral Lebanese-Israeli issues could then trigger a resumption of the 1991 Madrid peace conference, aiming to sign peace treaties between Israel and each of Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. That in turn would allow Syrian-Lebanese ties to be normalized, allowing the parties then to focus on cooling down Iraq and Iran.

One thing is sure, though: the region cannot be expected to remain calm while the underlying issues that anger people remain unresolved. Two key ones from the Arab perspective are Palestine and the role of Western armies in the region. The strength and assertiveness of the Islamist movements - whether through military confrontation like Hizbullah or winning elections as in many other cases - is a sign that majorities of Arab citizens are not content to remain docile and dejected in the state of subjugation and defeat that has defined them for the past several decades. The war in Lebanon is a reminder that unresolved political tensions can remain hidden under the rug for some time, but eventually they burst out with a vengeance. We should expect a period of years of dynamic political and perhaps military confrontations, as the new and old forces of the Middle East do battle to define its future identity.

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