

Prelude to War or Diplomacy? Reflections on the “Sixth War”

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The war that was waged by Israel against Hizbullah upon the organization's abduction of two soldiers and the killing of eight may yet turn out to be just the overture of another, longer and bloodier struggle. It may also contain the seeds of a political opening that might lead to a regional settlement.

The current precarious cessation of hostilities achieved by the UN Security Council's resolution 1701 may or may not hold. If it does not the war to come might involve not just this hybrid organization and its Palestinian kin, Hamas, but Iran and Syria as well.

The latest Lebanese crisis cannot be analyzed independently of other events in the region, either. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, post-Saddam Iraq, Iran's regional ambitions, and the Israeli incursion into Lebanon are all interrelated. Therefore the war, dubbed the “Sixth War” by the Arab public, allows a number of important observations and opportunities for those willing to reconfigure the politics of the Middle East.

“The owl of Minerva” wrote the great German philosopher Hegel, “spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.” It may be too early to give its full meaning to this as of yet inconclusive war, but the contours of a line of analysis are well in place. So are radically different and equally difficult choices available to policy makers in pursuit of a new order in the Middle East.

A relatively safe conclusion to draw from the recent conflict is that its meaning goes well beyond a Hizbullah-Israel war. By now it is well established that the war started out of a local dispute but is related to wider dynamics that made Lebanon once more the battlefield of other powers. Both Israel and Hizbullah have prepared for their confrontation for a long time. In the end, when judged by its original statements, Israel did not succeed in achieving its goals even if the IDF's actual performance proves to be better than appeared at first.

Still, Hizbullah was not destroyed militarily and the credibility of Israel's deterrence was damaged and perhaps its security problems exacerbated. Hizbullah's status as a state within a state did not change despite the deployment of Lebanese troops in the south of the country. In fact, Lebanese politics may have become more precarious with the threat of another round of civil war looming in the distance. Finally, the two Israeli soldiers have not been found or returned despite supposed negotiations taking place.

Hizbullah ended the war, despite its casualties and the loss of most of its long range missiles, politically more robust than before. Not only did the war terminate the effort of the Lebanese polity to finish off the special status of the organization, it saw Hizbullah's popularity skyrocket throughout the Arab world. Hizbullah became the institutional symbol of rising Islamic-Arab nationalism. Its leader Hasan Nasrallah emerged as the personification of a much longed-for Arab hero even if the remaining

Lebanese constituencies, in due time, come to resent the devastation his organization wrought upon them.

In any event, Hizbullah's perceived "victory" had a somewhat intriguing twist in terms of Islamist politics and Islam invoking violence. Its success undermined arch-rival al Qaeda's appeal for the angry masses of the region and perhaps the Muslim world. In fact, Shi'a Hizbullah provided the antidote to the viciously sectarian outlook and recipes of Sunni al Qaeda. It is highly unlikely under these circumstances that Hizbullah will subordinate itself to the central government in Beirut or that it will be disarmed as a result of the Security Council Resolution 1701. Nasrallah, however, will be hard pressed in choosing between Hizbullah's Lebanese political vocation and the selfish demands of its Syrian and Iranian patrons.

When one moves towards the regional context whose fragility made this latest confrontation almost inevitable, it is possible to discern three inherently conflicting trends. First, there is today in Middle Eastern societies a polarization along sectarian lines that was brought to light and exacerbated by the war in Iraq. The defining cause of this polarization is the rise of Shi'a to predominance in Iraq and the associated expansion of the Iranian sphere of influence in the region. Not only does this polarization play itself out in the brutality of the civil war now raging in Iraq, it also has spill-over effects in other countries where Shi'a minorities demand more citizenship rights and the Sunni majorities resent and react against such a development.

Secondly, as suggested earlier, Shi'a Hizbullah managed at the popular level to forge a pan-Arab/pan-Muslim sentiment because of its fight against the common enemy. It thereby reduced the schism between the Sunni and the Shi'a at least as it pertained to the Lebanese-Israeli conflict. Perhaps it is more correct to say that Hizbullah's popularity also derives from its solidarity with the Palestinians and therefore relates to the core problem of the Middle East, which is the irresolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Thirdly, the states in the region are scrambling to contain Iran, whose influence has risen considerably since the U.S. eliminated the regimes of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, widely considered to be mortal enemies of Tehran. The concern of the Sunni Arab states for Iran's rise was expressed by King Abdullah of Jordan, who warned about a rising "Shi'a crescent" two years earlier. This also explains why the Arab regimes for all intents and purposes initially sided with Israel.

Saudi King Abdullah's visit to Turkey symbolized the Arab regimes' quest to forge alliances to balance and contain Iran. In the context of the Iranian challenge, this visit, the first in forty years by a Saudi King, was suggestive of new openings by Riyadh to include Turkey in a coalition of Sunni states that would block Iran's growing influence. Ankara was also asked by the United Nations to serve in UNIFIL, an invitation supported wholeheartedly by the U.S., Israel and the Siniora government. Most recently, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, in talks with Turkey's Foreign Minister, assured him of Syria's full cooperation with Turkey if Ankara decided to send troops to join the UNIFIL force. This commitment, if genuine, may prove important since many Western analysts favour policies and incentives to

decouple Syria from Iran after twenty-six years of a mutually beneficial alliance between the two regimes. However, Mr. Assad later declared that he would consider UNIFIL a hostile force if it were deployed along the Lebanese-Syrian border. Obviously, the Syrian President does not wish to alienate Turkey but he is unlikely to change his policy because Turkish troops will be in Lebanon.

Related to this concern regarding Iran's hegemonic aspirations is the discomfort with the political power and credibility of a non-state actor such as Hizbullah (and Hamas, to a lesser extent) that is substantially supported by Iran. The distress of the Arab regimes with the power of a non-state actor must have been shared by Russia and EU members as well, since they initially stood by expecting Israel to finish its work in a relatively short period of time. This would have given the Lebanese state a chance to extend its authority unchallenged over the entire territory of the country. Hizbullah on its own prevented this. Iran and Syria made every effort to ensure that their ally/client would remain an autonomous actor within the Lebanese body politic with a great potential to disrupt the restoration of order.

The broader framework of these dynamics and the war itself consists of an American-Iranian struggle to shape the region and define Iran's role in it. Furthermore, the contest is also about the nature of the regime in Tehran as well as that in Damascus. Formulated thus, the confrontation becomes an existential one for many regional protagonists (including Israel) given the rhetoric of both the American and Iranian presidents. Iran's presumed desire to produce nuclear weapons attests both to its drive to acquire the status symbol of modern nationhood and to Tehran's ambition to become a regional hegemon.

In its quest for such a role, Iran also managed to use the Bush administration's unwillingness to engage with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The well calculated (and earnest) bigotry in the speeches of Mahmud Ahmedinejad about Israel and his denial of the Holocaust resonated with the Arab and broader Muslim publics and neutralized the disadvantages generated by the fact that the Iranian regime is Shi'a. Posturing as the champion of all the struggles dear to the Arabs, "the Iranians", Olivier Roy suggests, "were the real winners of the Lebanon conflict and will maintain their upper hand as long as Hizbullah is seen as a legitimate champion of the Arab cause, and not as part of the Shi'a crescent."

Iran's role in Iraq, its controversial nuclear-enrichment program and its support for Hizbullah as well as Hamas are manifestations of Iran's desire to be a regional hegemon and its willingness to confront the U.S. and its allies in the Middle East. Due to American miscalculations, lack of a realistic strategy, and obsession with ideological and military pre-eminence, Iran found the perfect conjuncture to pursue these aspirations. Rising oil revenues undoubtedly facilitate this task for a regime that is singularly negligent in managing its economy and providing for its own society.

Many commentators assert that this general strategic picture and the interconnectedness of the problems that plague the turbulent region that they liken to Europe in 1914, can lead to another round of war. On the other hand the ingredients of a regional settlement are also there. The course of settlement could only succeed if the military option for the resolution of these problems is discarded and diplomacy is given the upper hand. This would necessitate engagement in good faith between both

Iranian and the Syrian elites with other regional powers as well as with the West. However, Iran and Syria would require guarantees of regime security and recognition of their legitimate interests before engaging in responsible behaviour. Most important, though, is sober and multidimensional diplomatic leadership on the part of America as well as her regional allies for such a grand settlement to take place. As Henry Kissinger noted, "Diplomacy never operates in a vacuum. It persuades not by the eloquence of its practitioners but by assembling a balance of incentives and risks." We are indeed at a crossroads.

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