

In the Gunsight: Syria, or “A Nice Little War”

By [Uri Avnery](#)

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IT IS the old story about the losing gambler: he cannot stop. He continues to play, in order to win his losses back. He continues to lose and continues to gamble, until he has lost everything: his ranch, his wife, his shirt.

The same thing happens in the biggest gamble of all: war. The leaders that start a war and get stuck in the mud are compelled to fight their way ever deeper into the mud. That is a part of the very essence of war: it is impossible to stop after a failure. Public opinion demands the promised victory. Incompetent generals need to cover up their failure. Military commentators and other armchair strategists demand a massive offensive. Cynical politicians are riding the wave. The government is carried away by the flood that they themselves have let loose.

That is what happened this week, following the battle of Bint-Jbeil, which the Arabs have already started to call proudly Nasrallahgrad. All over Israel the cry goes up: Get into it! Quicker! Further! Deeper!

A day after the bloody battle, the cabinet decided on a massive mobilization of the reserves. What for? The ministers do not know. But it does not depend on them anymore, nor on the generals. The political and military leadership is tossed about on the waves of war like a boat without a rudder.

As has been said before: it is much easier to start a war than to finish one. The cabinet believes that it controls the war, but in reality it is the war that controls them. They have mounted a tiger, and can't be sure of getting off without being torn to pieces.

War has its own rules. Unexpected things happen and dictate the next moves. And the next moves tend to be in one direction: escalation.

DAN HALUTZ, the father of this war, thought that he could eliminate Hizbullah by means of the Air Force, the most sophisticated, most efficient and the generally most-most air force in the world. A few days of massive pounding, thousands of tons of bombs on neighborhoods, roads, electricity works and ports – and that's it.

Well, that wasn't it, as it turned out. The Hizbullah rockets continued to land in the north of Israel, hundreds a day. The public cried out. There was no way round a ground operation. First, small, elite units were put in. That did not help. Then brigades were deployed. And now whole divisions are demanded.

First they wanted to annihilate the Hizbullah positions along the border. When it was seen that that was not enough, it was decided to conquer the hills that dominate the border. There, the Hizbullah fighters were waiting and caused heavy casualties. And the rockets

continued to fly.

Now the generals are convinced that there is no alternative to occupying the whole area up to the Litani River, about 24 km from the border, in order to prevent the rockets from being launched from there. Then they will find out that they have to reach the Awali River, 40 km inside – the famous 40 km which Menachem Begin talked about in 1982.

And then? The Israeli army will be extended over a large area, and everywhere it will be exposed to guerilla attacks, of the sort Hizbullah excels in. And the missiles will continue to fly.

What next? One cannot stop. Public opinion will demand more decisive moves. Political demagogues will shout. Commentators will grumble. The people in the shelters will cry out. The generals will feel the heat. One cannot keep tens of thousands of reserve soldiers mobilized indefinitely. It is impossible to prolong a situation which paralyzes a third of the country.

Everybody will clamor to storm forwards. Where to? Towards Beirut in the North? Or towards Damascus, in the East?

THE CABINET ministers recite in unison: No! Never ever! We shall not attack Syria!

Perhaps some of them really don't intend to. They do not dream of a war with Syria. Definitely not. But the ministers only delude themselves when they believe that they control the war. The war controls them.

When it becomes clear that nothing is helping, that Hizbullah goes on fighting and the rockets continue to fly, the political and military leadership will face bankruptcy. They will need to pin the blame on somebody. On who? Well, on Assad, of course.

How is it possible that a small "terror organization", with a few thousand fighters altogether, goes on fighting? Where do they get the arms from? The finger will point towards Syria.

Even now, the army commanders assert that new rockets are flowing all the time from Syria to Hizbullah. True, the roads have been bombed, the bridges destroyed, but the arms somehow continue to arrive. The Israeli government demands that an international force be stationed not only along the Israeli-Lebanese border, but on the Lebanese-Syrian border, too. The queue of volunteers will not be long.

Then the generals will demand the bombing of roads and bridges inside Syria. For that, the Syrian Air Force will have to be neutralized. In short, a real war, with implications for the whole Middle East.

EHUD OLMERT and Amir Peretz did not think about that when they decided 17 days ago in haste and light heartedly, without serious debate, without examining other options, without calculating the risks, to attack Hizbullah. For politicians who do not know what war is, it was an irresistible temptation: there was a clear provocation by Hizbullah, international support was assured, what a wonderful opportunity! They would do what even Sharon did not dare.

Dan Halutz submitted an offer that could not be refused. A nice little war. Military plans were ready and well rehearsed. Certain victory. The more so, since on the other side there was no

real enemy army, just a “terror organization”.

How hotly the desire was burning in the hearts of Olmert and Peretz is attested by the fact that they did not even think about the lack of shelters in the Northern towns, not to mention the far-reaching economic and social implications. The main thing was to rush in and gather the laurels.

They had no time to think seriously about the war aim. Now they resemble archers who shoot their arrows at a blank sheet and then draw the rings around the arrow. The aims change daily: to destroy Hizbullah, to disarm them, to drive them out of South Lebanon, and perhaps just to “weaken” them. To kill Hassan Nasrallah. To bring the captured soldiers home. To extend the sovereignty of the Lebanese government over all of Lebanon. To establish a new-old Security Zone occupied by Israel. To deploy the Lebanese army and/or an international force along the border. To rehabilitate deterrence. To imprint into the consciousness of Hizbullah. (Our generals love imprinting into consciousnesses. That is a wonderfully safe aim, because it cannot be measured.)

THE MORE the nice little war continues, the clearer it becomes that these changing aims are not realistic. The Lebanese ruling group does not represent anybody but a small, rich and corrupt elite. The Lebanese army cannot and will not fight Hizbullah. The new “security zone” will be exposed to guerilla attacks and the international force will not enter the area without the agreement of Hizbullah. And this guerilla force, Hizbullah, the Israeli army cannot vanquish.

That is nothing to be ashamed of. Our army is in good - or, rather, bad - company. The term “guerilla” (“small war”) was coined in Spain, during the occupation of the country by Napoleon. Irregular bands of Spanish fighters attacked the occupiers and beat them. The same happened to the Russians in Afghanistan, to the French in Algeria, to the British in Palestine and a dozen other colonies, to the Americans in Vietnam, and is happening to them now in Iraq. Even assuming that Dan Halutz and Udi Adam are greater commanders than Napoleon and his marshals, they will not succeed where those failed.

When Napoleon did not know what to do next, he invaded Russia. If we don’t stop the operation, it will lead us to war with Syria.

Condoleezza Rice’s stubborn struggle against any attempt to stop the war shows that this is indeed the aim of the United States. From the first day of George Bush’s presidency, the neo-cons have been calling for the elimination of Syria. The deeper Bush sinks into the Iraqi quagmire, the more he needs to divert attention with another adventure.

By the way: One day before the outbreak of this war, our Minister of National Infrastructures, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, took part in the inauguration ceremony of the big pipeline that will conduct oil from the huge Caspian Sea reserves to the Turkish port of Ceyhan, just next to the Syrian border. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline avoids Russia and passes through Azerbaijan and Georgia, two countries closely aligned with Israel, like Turkey itself. There is a plan to bring a part of the oil from there along the Syrian and Lebanese coast to Ashkelon, where an existing pipeline will conduct it to Eilat, to be exported to the Far East. Israel and Turkey are to secure the area for the United States.

MUST THE sliding into a war with Syria happen? Is there no alternative?

Of course there is. To stop now, at once.

When President Lyndon Johnson felt that he was sinking into the morass of Vietnam, he asked his friends for advice. One of them answered with five words: "Declare victory and get out!"

We can do that. To stop investing more and more in a losing business. To be satisfied with what we can get now. For example: an agreement that will move Hizbullah a few kilometers from the border, along which an international force and/or the Lebanese army will be deployed, and to exchange prisoners. Olmert will be able to present that as a great victory, to claim that we have got what we wanted, that we have taught the Arabs a lesson, that anyhow we had no intention of achieving more. Nasrallah will also claim a great victory, asserting that he has taught the Zionist Enemy a lesson it will not forget, that Hizbullah remains alive, strong and armed, that he has brought back the Lebanese prisoners.

True, it will not be much. But that is what can be done to cut losses, as they say in the business world.

That can happen. If Olmert is clever enough to extricate himself from the trap, before it closes entirely. (As folk wisdom says: a clever person is one that gets out of a trap that a wise one would not have got into in the first place.) And if Condoleezza gets orders from her boss to allow it.

ON THE 17th day of the war, we must recognize that soon we will be faced with a clear choice: to slide into a war with Syria, intentionally or unintentionally, or to get a general agreement in the North, that will necessarily involve also Hizbullah and Syria. At the center of such an agreement will be the Golan Heights.

Olmert and Peretz did not think about that in those intoxicating moments on July 12, when they jumped at the opportunity to start a nice little war. But then, were they thinking at all?

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