

Clouds Gather Above the Middle East: War or No War?

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In recent years, Israel has proved capable of reading between the lines to assess accurately the politico-military situation in the Middle East, exploiting timely opportunities to hit targets of its enemies in Syria and Iraq. Domestic, regional and unlimited US support for far-right Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu permitted his military machine to close in on his nearby opponents in the region, i.e. Syria, Iraq, Hezbollah, and Iranian targets in Syria, at moments of weakness without triggering much of a response from their side.

Today more than ever, the possibilities of war are increasing, a war that may be triggered by Israel and the US due to the consequences of the harsh sanctions on Iran and its partner the Lebanese Hezbollah that will be certainly end up weakening the local Lebanese and Iranian economies. Moreover, and most importantly, any sign of weakness on the part of Israel's opponents, if analysed inadequately, could push Israel to provoke Hezbollah in Lebanon and its allies to a war.

The history of Israeli aggression towards Lebanon is long. Lebanese domestic reaction to the report of last week's meeting of the Hezbollah leadership and the analysis of the situation may yet again give wrong signals to Israel, signalling that it can attack neighbouring countries in what it perceives as a moment of weakness. However, if these signs and signals do indeed lead to war, that will certainly be devastating to Lebanon, more than the 2006 war, and most likely also destructive to Israel at a level it has not experienced since 1973.

Lebanese reaction to the prospect of a war this summer – despite the personal evaluation of Hezbollah leader who said otherwise, opposing his military commander's assessments according to what he said during his speech – could be significant. The Lebanese people are no longer ready to pay the price of another war (after the 2006 war and the eight-years of war attempting to impose regime change on Syria).

Indeed, the popular reaction revealed many other crucial, underlying issues: the number of casualties Hezbollah has suffered and is not enthusiastic to go through the same losses; the current poor relationship between Hezbollah and the oil-rich countries which will reduce tourism and prevent any investment in reconstructing the country if it is devastated by a war initiated by Israel (as in 2006); the harsh sanctions on Iran imposing a tight budget now mostly allocated domestically, thereby limiting support to its partners overseas to cover the costs of Israeli-caused damage in case of war; the impossibility of resupplying Hezbollah with weapons at the same speed Iran was capable of between 2006 and 2018; the superiority of the Israeli war machine in inflicting great damage on Lebanon, considered by the US and Israel as responsible as a whole for embracing Hezbollah; and the ability of Israel's friends and allies to resupply Tel Aviv with weapons and financial support to

reconstruct any heavy damage Hezbollah could inflict in the “unlikely” event of a future war. All these factors do not decrease the likelihood of a future war in the Middle East; they are portents of danger and potential escalation.

The Hezbollah leadership’s personal assessment of the “unlikely” of a war this summer may be correct regarding the timing because the initiative has always been in the hands of Israel. Nevertheless, every military and political leader takes into consideration the worst-case scenario. Saying otherwise or spreading optimism may serve to promote an inaccurate feeling of well-being. On the other hand, it might indeed help avoiding domestic bickering, but would also represent an evasion of tangible concerns and the prospect of an even bleaker reality. Part of Lebanese are already labouring under heavy sanctions and the US is taking every possible opportunity to increase these sanctions on Hezbollah and on its rich and generous donors and businessmen.

The report of the outline of Hezbollah’s commanders gathering with their chief was not well-received by local society. This reaction illustrates how sharply the country is divided between supporters and opponents of Hezbollah. It also indicates how powerful is the effect of local and regional media on decision makers when they attack Hezbollah and its view of current politico-military affairs- and how fragile is the alignment behind Hezbollah’s readiness to respond to any future war. And lastly, it gives a clear warning that Hezbollah supporters are not ready to accept the loss of their leader in case of war, a destiny no-one have a say in it.

These messages are read by friends of Hezbollah, its members and commanders, but also by the enemies of Hezbollah. Israel – the country responsible for initiating every single war inflicted on Lebanon – is also reading the flow of information provided unwittingly by the reaction of the population and that of Hezbollah leadership. Nevertheless, the Israeli leadership needs to consider that, if cornered, Hezbollah can empty every silo and rain down on Israel and every single missile and rocket in its possession- abandoning the “Rules of Engagement” tacitly agreed between the two parties in case of war.

Because Hezbollah will have nothing to lose in case of war, it can empty its arsenal against Israel and play its cards right to the end. The question is: even if Israel enjoys the support of the world media, financial and many militarily powerful friends, is it ready to go through a long and horrific war just to empty Hezbollah’s missiles and rocket stock? If that is the Israeli objective, its chances of success are slim. Hezbollah is part of the society and cannot be removed unless several hundred thousand people are eliminated from Lebanon, the number that represents the society protecting and part of Hezbollah. Why would the US and or Israel declare a general war when financial sanctions are much more effective at little or no cost?

Iran, Hezbollah’s main partner and ally, is headed towards the unknown. The US has announced its intention to reduce Iran’s oil exports to zero, ending Iran oil waivers to US partners. Although it is virtually impossible to reach this desired and strict level of sanctions because many countries – mainly China, Iraq and Turkey – will not abide by the US’s will at this first stage, it is certain that Iran will not be capable of exporting all of its two million barrels of oil daily (Iran produces 3.45 million b/d). The US is not imposing an explicit embargo on Iran, otherwise, it would be considered an act of war and would spark an immediate warlike retaliation by Iran and its allies. The US is seeking to impose economic sanctions on the countries who buy Iranian oil, thus cornering Hezbollah’s main financier.

It is a war of strangulation that in the short and medium term is showing itself effective. Although this kind of efficient war was run in Syria on a micro level, will it work on a wider level- and what will be the reaction of Iran and its allies if cornered? A difficult question to answer today as the clouds gather above the Middle East.

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