

The Day After: A Reading into the Post-Lebanon War

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If it is true that the 33-day war on Lebanon was the culmination of regional developments and that it can hardly be fathomed separate from the brutal Israeli war on Gaza or the faltering American imperial project in Iraq, then it is hardly inconsistent to ponder the implications of the war's outcome on the region as a whole, notwithstanding Lebanon.

Syria's fallout with Lebanon and the subsequent withdrawal of its troops in 2005 has left the country divided to the core. The political diatribe of that period had little to do with democracy. Doubtless, Lebanon's democratic experience preceded that date by far, but according to the selective readings of the Bush administration, it was then that American pressure, coupled with Lebanon's so-called Cedar revolution that brought about the end of Syria's hegemony and the birth of a "genuine" Arab democracy.

The truth is as always at odds with the Bush administration's narrative. The abrupt removal of Syria has turned Lebanon into a hotbed for civil strife, if not a probable civil war. Lebanon's conventional powerhouses were now competing for dominance; factionalism was once more the most pertinent factor in deciding the country's political composition. Hezbollah, and its widening popular support seemed a nuisance amid grand designs to recreate a new Lebanon. A strong-armed resistance, regardless of the very ominous and real Israeli threat, would ensure the political prestige of the Shiites, a historically inferior and politically under-represented group. Former warlords, themselves representatives of various Lebanon sects were all vying for dominance. The simmering power struggle was, expectedly, fought under the banner of "uncovering the truth" of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's murder; indeed, the "truth" at times seemed the least urgent objective.

Hezbollah needed to reinforce its relevance in the ongoing debate, especially after the loss of Syria, a very significant backer. Thus, regardless of the precise nature of the border clash with Israeli troops on July 12 — which sent Israel scrambling to produce one of its most self-defeating military adventures — Hezbollah used the opportunity without any reservations.

Israel had entered the war based on premeditated calculations and has long prepared for it with full American backing, which was displayed brazenly the moment the first Israeli bomb fell on Lebanon, to eventually destroy most of its infrastructure. This claim was validated repeatedly by Israeli and American officials, as was counted for by the influential American journalist Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker* on Aug. 14 ("Washington's Interests in Israel's War".)

Newly elected Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert awaited the opportunity that would cement his position as a ruthless and canny military man — an important job description for any

Israeli leader. The Israeli media and the opposition in the Likud Party were — and are still — in doubt of such a claim. Since his open war against Palestinians as a collective punishment for electing Hamas to power yielded little success, the need for diversion was imperative. (Israel has hoped to topple Hamas, either directly or by inciting a civil war among Palestinians, as it empowered and armed the Fatah faction, a loser in the most recent Palestinian elections, to lock horns with the elected Hamas leadership. Though the plan worked to the extent that dozens of Palestinians were killed and wounded in sporadic clashes, a civil war seemed unlikely. To the contrary, both Hamas and Fatah became much closer to a deal that would guarantee a power sharing government, and a much more moderate Hamas political stance.)

Moreover, another war front in Lebanon would allow Israel to claim a battle on two fronts against Islamic terrorists, as government spokesmen often asserted; going as far as describing Hamas as “Israel’s own Al-Qaeda.”

That precise logic was the needed platform that would also allow the Bush administration to lend a helping hand, and unreservedly so, to defeat Israel’s foes, for it is all interlinked, or so the neoconservative logic goes: Hamas and Hezbollah champion Islamic agenda; both are backed and financed by Iran (an Islamic regime) and Syria (a secular regime, but never mind that), and all are hell-bent on destroying Israel and America. A naive logic, perhaps, but with the right media spins, it could justify yet another war or two.

However, this convenient logic meant full American involvement in support for Israel, just shy from actual combat with the enemy. “It is time for a new Middle East. It is time to say to those who do not want a new Middle East that we will prevail,” is how US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wished to convey the new nature of her government’s alliance with Israel in a joint press conference with Olmert, two weeks after the Lebanon war began. Rice signaled the official entry of Israel into the US “war on terror” club. Time has proved her assertion a costly mistake.

The Bush administration insists on engaging in new military debacles to escape old ones. A victory, any victory could be of essence before the November elections, as an unimpressed American public continues to withdraw their support of their government’s reckless policies. A victory in the Lebanon war, as a proxy war against Iran, would’ve served such an objective well.

Thus it was not mere coincidence, in my mind, that Israel’s war of “self-defense” on Lebanon was timed to cover the failure of the administration’s newest military sweep in Baghdad, and the return of thousands of troops to the warring city, at a time when the administration spoke proudly of possible troop reduction. The war on Afghanistan was the only claim of victory in the war on terror. That prize too, is being gradually lost.

Few had expected the Lebanon war to yield such unprecedented outcomes. Despite the war of rhetoric, immediately after the declaration of an end to hostilities in accordance with UN resolution 1701, it was clear that Israel had failed, and for the first time, to militarily subdue an Arab foe. Over 30,000 Israeli troops armed with the best weapons American money could buy failed to defeat 1,200 lightly armed Hezbollah fighters. How will such an historic setback impact the Israeli collective psyche is yet to be seen, though I worry that Palestinians will feel the brunt of Israel’s attempt to restore its confidence. As for the impact on the Arab psyche, so accustomed to defeats, and suspicious of unwarranted claims of victory, watching one elated episode of “Ma’ al-Nas” (With the People) on Al-Jazeera television,

speaks volumes.

Amid the intense debate regarding the looming political reformation in Lebanon, it seems that a more consequential debate has been forgotten: The relationship between the Lebanon war and the real future of the Middle East. The stratagem that was meant to crush any meaningful nationalistic project and secure the US and Israel's economic and strategic dominance in the region, received another major blow in Lebanon.

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