

A defeat for Israel, but also for justice

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The U.N. resolution is a consolation prize for the Olmert regime, whose failure in Lebanon throws the wider U.S.-Israeli game plan for the region into disarray.

WHEN ISRAEL attacked Lebanon a month ago, it had two stated and two unstated military objectives. The stated objectives were the unconditional release of two of its soldiers captured by Hizbollah, and the physical destruction of the Lebanese resistance force, its leadership and command structure. As for the unstated objectives, the first was to so totally degrade the civilian infrastructure of the country that the non-Shia population of Lebanon would turn against Hizbollah and the Shias for inviting the wrath of Israel upon them in this manner. And the second, to deny Iran and its supporters the chance of opening a second front against Israel from close quarters — in the event of American airstrikes on Iranian nuclear installations.

In turn, these military objectives were part of a wider political objective: to use Israel's overwhelming military superiority as the basis for implementing the Sharon-Olmert plan of a unilaterally imposed "peace settlement" on the region which would leave Tel Aviv in control of as much Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian land and water as it deems necessary.

Predictable blame-game

When the promised ceasefire takes effect on Monday morning, however, Israel will find that not a single one of its objectives has been achieved.

This failure has ignited a predictable blame-game within the Israeli military and political establishment but the repercussions of military defeat will travel much further afield. The Olmert regime took a big gamble in going to war and the Bush administration backed it to the hilt in the hope that a "New Middle East" could be built on the backs of a military machine that was believed to be invincible. By smashing that myth of invincibility and registering a decisive military and even moral victory over the Israeli Defence Forces, Hizbollah has thrown the neo-conservative agenda for a "New Middle East" into utter disarray.

The Lebanese militia has not only managed to preserve its capability to fight despite the withering bombardment of its strongholds in southern Lebanon but has also inflicted severe losses on the Israeli military. Nor has its ability to fire Katyusha rockets into northern Israel in retaliation for the Israeli bombing of civilian areas been effectively degraded. The IDF's desperate push towards the Litani river following the adoption of a ceasefire resolution by the United Nations Security Council has itself cost the lives of more than two dozen soldiers, taking the number of Israeli troops killed in the war to well over 100.

More than 30 years of enforcing a military occupation and fighting children and poorly-equipped guerrillas have clearly taken their toll on the ability of the legendary Israeli army to fight a full-fledged war. That is why, right at the outset, the IDF had hoped to rely more or less exclusively on air power and deploy ground forces only after Hizbollah had been sufficiently softened up. However, the international outrage that Israel's bombardment of Lebanon provoked, particularly after the Qana massacre, forced Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his backers in Washington to change tack. Israel realised it had to commit a more significant detachment of ground troops if Hizbollah was to be defeated. At the same time, it preferred the easier option of an international stabilisation force coming in to finish the job for it.

Since the political balance of power in the Security Council is more decisively in favour of Israel than the military balance is on the ground in southern Lebanon, Washington's priority has been to use its clout at the U.N. to bring in to the region a well-armed military force that could prosecute Tel Aviv's war aims more effectively. UNSC Resolution 1701, passed unanimously on Friday, was originally intended to do just that. Its original version ignited outrage in Lebanon and the Arab world but even as now amended, the resolution is problematic on a number of grounds. At the same time, its military provisions fall somewhat short of the original American-Israeli objective.

Rather than creating a new stabilisation force — which would respond, by default, to the command and control structures of the U.S. and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) — the Security Council has expanded the mandate and size of the existing U.N. peacekeeping force on the ground, UNIFIL. The new mandate will include monitoring the cessation of hostilities, accompanying and supporting the Lebanese Army as it deploys up to the Israeli border in tandem with the Israeli withdrawal, assisting the Lebanese army "in taking steps towards the establishment" of an area between the border and the Litani river that is free of armed forces not authorised by the Lebanese Government, and assisting the Lebanese Government "at its request" to establish better control over its borders.

In order to discharge this enlarged mandate, UNIFIL has been authorised to "take all necessary action" — a code word for the use of even offensive military action — to ensure that the territory where it is deployed is "not utilised for hostile activities of any kind." In other words, UNIFIL would be authorised to attack Hizbollah if the militia sends fighters south of the Litani to launch rockets into Israel. UNIFIL has also been authorised to use deadly force "to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence," which, at least in theory, could also apply to situations such as Israeli airstrikes and attacks on civilian areas of the kind Lebanon has witnessed this past month.

Whether this expanded mandate will help preserve the peace will depend entirely on UNIFIL's ability to avoid getting caught in the wider American political agenda. If it acts professionally and solely as a facilitator for the Lebanese army, there is no reason why Hizbollah will not cooperate with it. At any rate, Hizbollah, with the consent of the Lebanese Government, is free to preserve its military capability north of the Litani as a hedge against future Israeli aggression.

The problem with Resolution 1701, however, is that it is structured in such a way as to prolong or re-ignite the conflict between Israel and Lebanon rather than to settle it expeditiously on the basis of reason and justice.

The most important shortcoming is the resolution's vague formulation on the need for Israel

to vacate the territories in Lebanon it has forcibly occupied over the past month. If Israel takes the view that it will not begin withdrawing until the expanded UNIFIL force is in place, Hizbollah will be perfectly justified in attacking what is after all an army of occupation. But apart from the immediate issue of an Israeli withdrawal, the resolution contains no timeframe for tackling the root causes of the conflict. Israel will remain in occupation of the Shebaa farms, which is Lebanese territory, it will not be obliged to hand over within any specified time period the map of land mines it has laid on Lebanese territory, nor is it obliged to return the Lebanese prisoners it is holding. As for the hundreds of Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace and territorial waters which occur every year, no specific mechanisms for redressal have been created to ensure these do not occur again.

Glaring omissions

There are other glaring omissions too. For example, the resolution does not oblige Israel to pay Lebanon any compensation for the destruction of civilian life and property it has wilfully caused since its attack began on July 12.

Unless the international community moves sincerely to address these fundamental questions and finds a way to impose punitive costs on Israel for its wholly disproportionate use of military force, the underlying problem will never go away.

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