

More to Lebanon War than Meets the Eye: Israel's Strategic Objective is to break up the Syria-Lebanon Front

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At first glance, history seems to repeat itself in Lebanon, where a lengthy cold war is intermittently interrupted by an extreme show of violence as traditional players quickly sprint into action, stacking their support behind one party or the other.

News headlines remind us of past conflicts such as that of 1978 – when Israel illegally occupied parts of Lebanon – and 1982 – when Israel unleashed a full scale invasion and most deadly campaign against its small neighbor to the north, killing tens of thousands, mostly civilians.

But the unreserved significance of the ongoing conflict has more to do with Israel's military ambitions – not necessarily colonial, but rather strategic – than with Hizbollah's ability to strike deep into Israel.

Let's examine the bigger picture, starting well before Hizbollah's daring capture of two Israeli soldiers in cross border fighting, which unfortunately, at least as far the media is concerned, is the solitary provocation that sparked the current conflict. (A San Francisco Chronicle investigative report by Matthew Kalman – Israel Set War Plan More Than a Year Ago, July 21, 2006 – sheds more light on Israel's intent to carry a three-week bombardment of Lebanon as early as 2000.)

For years, Israel's strategic objective has been to break up the Syria-Lebanon front – to isolate Syria and meddle as always in Lebanon's affairs – while diminishing whatever leverage Iran has in Lebanon through its support of Hizbollah.

As I argued in the first chapter of my book: the Second Palestinian Intifada, Israel's military defeat in Lebanon and its army's abrupt exit in May 2000, has espoused what became increasingly known as "the spirit of resistance" among Palestinians and Lebanese alike. Israel has proved once and for all to have serious military shortcomings, and Hizbollah – an organization that was comprised mostly of the relatives of Israel's victims in the invasion of 1982 and subsequent years- was the single entity that exposed those limitations.

Thus, Israel upgraded its use of violence to unprecedented degrees during the Palestinian uprising of September 2000 – months after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon- to send a clear message that their military travesty in Lebanon will not be repeated elsewhere. Moreover, despite its insistence that it left Lebanon for good, Israel never departed from its

original military goal of destroying Hizbollah or meddling in Lebanese affairs.

Then there was the American attack on Iraq in March 2003 – clearly a highly dangerous military adventure – which was lauded by Israeli and pro-Israeli neo-conservative ideologues in Tel Aviv and in Washington as prudent and indispensable involvement, that would further cement Israel's security and the US strategic objectives in the Middle East – thoughtlessly considered one and the same.

The Iraq war was anticipated to be a 'cakewalk', which would be followed – according to various neo-cons documents available on the web – by a regime change in Syria and Iran, respectively. Though both countries have proved unequally vital in the US so-called 'war on terror', Israel views both as imminent and ominous threats, for only these countries, after the collapse of the Iraqi military front, still possess real armies and potential military threats. Of course, such a claim, at least in the Syrian case, is highly questionable.

Bogged down in Iraq in an impossible war, it became clear that the US military is simply incapable of taking on more of Israel's foes. According to Israel's friends in the US Congress and media – and they are plentiful – the mission was not accomplished. This explains the growing neo-con intellectual insurgency against the administration, accusing it of 'mishandling' the Iraq conflict and failing to appreciate the gravity of the Iran threat. While President Bush is relentless in his anti Iran and Syria rhetoric, it's becoming more transparent that a full invasion of Iran, or even Syria are now in the realm of wishful thinking.

With American military ambitions slowly dying out in the dust of the battlefield in Baghdad and Ramadi, Israel is growing utterly frustrated. Why? On one hand, despite the intense pressure on Syria to abandon Lebanon – as it did – Hizbollah's military and political influence hardly faded, as Israel has hoped for an immediate overhaul of the political map of Lebanon and the dismantling of Hizbollah. Even worse, a movement that is parallel to Hizbollah in many ways in Palestinian and Arab psyche, Hamas, was on the rise, this time – ironically – as part of the US advocated democratic reforms campaign in the Middle East.

Hamas' advent to power in January 2006, was followed by a less decisive Israeli election that brought to power a questionable coalition, whose prime minister and defense minister are known for having no military browses, a major diversion from Israel's traditional politics. In other words, the new Israeli government had a great deal to prove on the battlefield to receive much needed validation at home.

Similar to its political pressure on Lebanon and Syria – using Washington as a conduit- Tel Aviv took on Hamas: a suffocating economic siege, an international smear campaign and a diplomatic blockade – using Washington, but also corrupt ex-Palestinian officials to achieve its goals. That too has failed terribly, which prompted military strikes against Gaza, killing scores and wounding hundreds, mostly civilians. In a rare diversion from its political leadership, the Hamas militant wing responded by capturing an Israeli soldier at the border, vowing to only release him if all Palestinian women and children in Israeli jails are set free.

As far as Israel and the US administration – and much of the Western media – are concerned, Hamas provoked the Israeli military wrath that followed, the killing and wounding hundreds of innocent people and destroying what it has spared in past onslaughts. While Arab governments carried on with business as usual, Hizbollah – who

must've know that an Israeli military campaign against Lebanon was inevitable any way – decided to take the initiative by opening a war front on Israel's northern border in the least comfortable times for the Israeli military, with the hope to relieve some of the pressure on Palestinians. Whether it miscalculated or not is another story.

Neither Syria nor Iran asked Hizbollah to start a new war on Israel, though I can imagine that both will likely attempt to reap its benefits in case Hizbollah manages to survive the Israeli onslaught, which is, according to US analyst, William Lind, a victory in itself.

Israel doesn't want to occupy Lebanon, but is keenly interested in destroying Hizbollah, thus sending a clear message to Iran that it is next. It also wants to broaden the Middle East conflict to force the US into an uninvited showdown with Iran and Syria. Expectedly, the US is providing 100 percent political, military and financial cover to Israel's adventurism in Lebanon, but will it go further?

Hizbollah cannot lose if it wishes to survive as a formidable political force in Lebanon. If Hizbollah is disarmed, it is feared that Israel will go back to its full scale meddling in Lebanese affairs, isolating Syria even further, and gaining a strategic battle in its looming showdown with Tehran.

Tragically, Israel's military adventurism and the US reprehensible backing of Israel's endless quest for regional domination has so far seen the death and wounding of thousands of innocent Lebanese civilians, and the destruction of a nation that has barely recovered from past Israeli wars, to once again collapse under the rubble of a new one.

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