

A Growing Divide

The Effect of the 2006 Summer War on Religion, Politics, and Power in Lebanon and the Middle East

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“Nasrallah, this brave person, He responded to the calls to take vengeance. The Arab blood became hotter and hotter, The boldness and the courage that characterizes this battle is an Islamic courage. You can launch as many rockets as you want but our people will never surrender... Zionism and Zionists are the biggest poison in Arab land...”

— “The Hawk of Lebanon,” The Northern Band, Palestine, 2006

“Even if you’ll launch rockets at us, or threaten the Galilee,

With your friends from Syria and Iran...

Together we will overcome the evil trouble.

Yalla ya Nasrallah— we will screw you Insha’allah

We will send you back to Allah, with all the Hezbollah.

Yallah ya Nasrallah— go away ya garbage

It’s already been sentenced from above— that this is your end.”

— “Yalla ya Nasrallah,” Frishman and the Pioneers, Israel, 2006

INTRODUCTION

The July/August 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, coined the Sixth War by al-Jazeera and officially named The Second Lebanon War by Israel,¹ represented more than a 34-day conflict. It was the unavoidable collision of two greater regional conflicts. It was the continuation of the unresolved battle between Israel and Hezbollah since the Israeli withdrawal from most of Southern Lebanon in 2000, and it was also the latest move by a prominent Shiite organization, supported by Iran, which threatens the status quo Sunni hegemony in the Middle East. The 2006 Summer War was the most recent catalyst plunging Lebanon into political uncertainty. Israel has not escaped political repercussions either. However, thus far, Hezbollah has been unable to mold military success into lasting political gains. More ominously, the conflict in Lebanon mirrors a greater divide between the region’s Shiites and Sunnis, which has been exacerbated by strained Iranian-US relations, with Iran supporting Shiite movements and the US backing majority-Sunni Arab

governments.

Even before the UN-brokered August 14, 2006 ceasefire went into effect, politicians, journalists, and displaced citizens on both sides of the Lebanese-Israeli border were busy labeling a winner. Both Israel and Hezbollah declared victory. Israel failed to accomplish its perceived initial twin goals of disarming or destroying Hezbollah and reclaiming its two soldiers captured inside the Israeli border on July 12. Israel effectively destroyed much of Lebanon's infrastructure. Moreover, as some parts of the country were hit harder than others and Shiites disproportionately bore the brunt of the war, the July/August 2006 War has had the effect of worsening existing tensions between Lebanon's confessional groups, manifested through street clashes and increased political opposition to the current government. Hezbollah, meanwhile, held off the Israeli army longer than any Arab force had in the past and was still able to fire rockets into Israel on the final day of the conflict. In this way, Hezbollah seemed to have held its footing while standing up to the Israeli Goliath, a perception that formed the basis for its claims to victory. Lebanon's current political dilemma, initiated by the resignation of all five Shiite cabinet ministers, one Christian minister loyal to Syria, and Hezbollah's demand for a greater hand in governmental affairs, has dramatically overshadowed Hezbollah's apparent victory.

Outside of Lebanon, the Palestinian-Israeli crisis has stalled, Iraq has spiraled deeper into a sectarian battlefield, and the seizure (and subsequent release 13 days later) of 15 British sailors by Iran heightened tensions between the West and the Islamic state. The Arab Summit held in Riyadh in March 2007, to which Lebanon sent two delegations, also failed to either resolve Lebanon's political stalemate or advance Arab-Israeli dialogue towards an eventual Palestinian state. The media strives to sum up conflicts into neat "Sunni versus Shiite" and "pro-Iran versus pro-US" headlines, but nothing in the Middle East can be so easily labeled. Either by "axis" or "crescent," the Arab world is falling apart at its Western-constructed national seams and realigning by religion. Two Arab countries with dominant Shiite populations—Lebanon and Iraq—are preoccupied with national instability, which appears to be spreading throughout the Middle East. Regional powers are taking sides based on religious divisions, and international powers, primarily the United States, seem content to further incite these divides as policy in the region.

HEZBOLLAH, LEBANON AND ISRAEL

When Hezbollah fighters captured two soldiers in a cross-border raid on

July 12, 2006, celebratory fireworks were set off in the southern suburbs of Beirut, a predominantly Shiite neighborhood where many families from Southern Lebanon fled to and resettled during the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War. To these citizens, Hezbollah is more than a resistance movement; it provides community support by way of schools, hospitals and other charitable institutions. Hours later, the Israeli army let loose its own “light show” of explosions on Beirut’s airport, escalating the conflict to a 34-day war which killed over 1,200 people on both sides of the border; over 1,000 of these were Lebanese civilians. It displaced nearly a quarter of the Lebanese population who sought refuge in empty schools or with extended family, as well as thousands of Israelis, many of whom sought refuge in bomb shelters; and destroyed much of Lebanon’s infrastructure. As Israel launched naval, aerial, and ground campaigns in hopes of recovering its two soldiers through military strength and disarming its northern enemy for good, Hezbollah kept a steady stream of rockets sailing into northern Israel and remained armed as the August fourteenth ceasefire began.

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), established after the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon in 1978, was expanded to over 10,000 international peacekeepers to patrol the Lebanese-Israeli border in cooperation with the Lebanese Army as part of the ceasefire. Overall, Hezbollah’s military presence in Southern Lebanon declined, but local support for the Islamic resistance movement remains. UNIFIL records all movement that crosses the border, including Israeli airplanes that have continually violated Lebanese airspace. Former UNIFIL commander Major-General Alain Pellegrini said in February that Israel violates Lebanese airspace on “a daily basis.” While all appears quiet on the southern front, Israel and some Western nations charge that Hezbollah is continuing to rearm. Some media sources say that Hezbollah has moved its base of operations north of the Litani River, where UNIFIL does not patrol.² Despite the accusations, the over flights, and one unexpected incident of exchanged gunfire between the Lebanese and the Israeli Armies, the ceasefire has ensured a period of calm. Neither side of the border, however, believes that the conflict has been resolved.

On the surface, this war can be seen as the continuation of an Israel-Hezbollah struggle that began with the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon in 1982. This invasion led to the establishment of Hezbollah, created to liberate Southern Lebanon from its Israeli occupiers. Using guerrilla tactics, Hezbollah fought and resisted the Israeli Army until its withdrawal in 2000. A powerful but humiliated national army does not easily forget such defeats. Israeli premier Ehud Olmert admitted that the operations used during the

2006 Summer War had been planned at least four months in advance.³

Five months after the August 14 ceasefire, fireworks again decorated the Beirut sky after news that the Israeli Army's chief of staff, Dan Halutz, had become the third and highest ranking Israeli general to resign over the war.⁴ While the resignation may have cemented a military victory for Hezbollah, the act itself was symbolic and had no impact on the domestic political battle Lebanon has been enmeshed in since the ceasefire ended all military operations.

During the war, Hezbollah Secretary General Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah was labeled by Arabs in the regions as an Arab hero in the mold of former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.⁵ However Nasrallah's position became divisive when he took his hard-won political capital from battle against a common Arab aggressor and tried to leverage it against the Lebanese government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. Hezbollah and its constituents demanded early elections or the formation of a national unity government that would give the opposition veto power in the cabinet.

All five Shiite cabinet ministers, representing the two main Shiite parties, Hezbollah and Amal, resigned on November 11, 2006. Environment Minister Yaccoub Sarraf, a Greek Orthodox pro-Syrian supporter of Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, became the sixth minister to hand in his resignation. "We're in for a long government crisis," predicted Sateh Nouredine, managing editor of the daily *As-Safir* newspaper, in November.⁶ The nature of the foundation of the Lebanese government makes it prone to such crisis, as it is a government where politicians are labeled more by their religion than their political ideology.

The Lebanese government is sectarian in nature where different positions and quotas are reserved for politicians depending on religion. The positions were determined by a census last taken in 1932, when Maronite Christians were the largest sect. The president of the republic is a Maronite Christian; the prime minister is a Sunni and the speaker of the house a Shiite. Although exact figures are unknown, the religious composition is indisputably different today where Muslims now constitute the majority.

The resignations were followed by the assassination of Phalange Party leader and Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel, a member of the pro-government March 14th coalition, on November 21. He was gunned down in broad daylight on the eve of Lebanon's Independence Day. The Lebanese cabinet was already teetering on the brink of collapse when, on December 1, the Hezbollah-led opposition took their disapproval of the government to the streets, launching an open-ended sit-in around Riad al-Solh Square and Martyr's Square, the same location of a large demonstration in 2005

following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri when hundreds of thousands had protested Syrian tutelage of the country. The square neighbors the Serail, the government building where the remaining ministers, including Siniora, conduct business. Most protesters expected the government to collapse within a week, or at most a month. But Siniora has not only dug in his heels, he has shored up international support to keep his administration afloat.

Despite Nasrallah's military performance, the downtown sit-in would have been hard to continue if not carried out with the support of Hezbollah's Christian ally, Michel Aoun of the Free Patriotic Movement. Aoun has found this to be a politically advantageous alliance in order to challenge other Lebanese Christian factions and the other Christian leaders potentially vying for the next presidency. His participation has lent a coalitional-aspect to Nasrallah's demands for a "clean"—that is, transparent—government and has divided Lebanon's Christian minority.

On January 25, 2007, clashes broke out in the cafeteria of the Beirut Arab University and spread into the streets between residents of the predominantly Sunni neighborhood of Tariq al-Jdideh and Shiites living in the Southern suburbs. A curfew was imposed on the Lebanese capital for the first time since April 1996, which was the last Israeli incursion in Lebanon.⁷ Following the clashes, young men from Tariq al-Jdideh revamped a de facto neighborhood watch group into an organization called the Panthers of Tariq al-Jdideh. When asked if the patrol was armed, one young man in the neighborhood smiled and said every house in Tariq al-Jdideh had at least one gun. The Panthers have their own flag and t-shirts and the digital logo has been circulated as the cell phone screensaver for many in the area.⁸ They are one of many sectarian group to adopt logos and flags as a way to fortify sectarian unity during times of political instability.

Lebanon is not the only Eastern Mediterranean country facing political crisis. Following Halutz's resignation, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is under pressure to follow his army chief of staff. As Ariel Sharon lies in a coma, his visionary Kadima party, established in 2005 to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza and select areas of the West Bank and which Olmert now heads, wagered most of the new party's credibility on the outcome of the summer war; the present situation has left many Israelis looking left or right to other parties for their security. No more than 22 percent of Israelis think their country is ready to fight Hezbollah again, according to an opinion poll by Israeli television. Forty percent of respondents felt that Israel was not ready to go up against Hezbollah once more. For 37 percent, Israel had come out the loser in the month-long summer war with Hezbollah.⁹ But despite

the ratings, the Israeli government's continual complaints and allegations that Hezbollah is receiving arms from Iran and Syria and that the Lebanese government and the UN are not doing enough to stop the alleged flow of arms, has some concerned that the Israeli army is preparing to try and solve the problem unilaterally again.¹⁰

LEBANON IN GREATER CONTEXT

The 2006 Summer War also highlighted the divide within Islam, seen as a power struggle between Shiite Iran and traditional Sunni American allies such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 aimed to preempt terror but instead opened the door to an opportunistic Iran that encouraged Shiite empowerment. "The whole region has been engulfed in anger since the war on Iraq more than three years ago," observed Diaa Rashwan, an Egyptian analyst with the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.¹¹

This anger predated Iraq; Arab anger against the West has roots in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, American military bases in the Gulf, and general resentment of Western interference in the region. In Iraq, this anger was unleashed when the US-led invasion embarked on a "war of choice" that overthrew an anti-Western dictator and expected to be welcomed by a middle-class Iraqi Shiite majority similar to the expatriate community that had pushed for the war.

Shiites comprise only 10 to 15 percent of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims.¹² Historical differences between Shiites and Sunnis stem from a dispute over who was the rightful heir to the Prophet Muhammad. The Shiites believe his direct descendants should have inherited the mantle, starting with his cousin and son-in-law, Ali. Sunnis endorsed the Prophet's companions and slaughtered Ali's son Hussein. Shiites were marginalized and persecuted in the Sunni Arab world for most of Islam's history and disregarded by Sunni fundamentalists as apostates. Then the war in Iraq happened and altered the power balance in the Middle East, traditionally ruled by Sunnis.

The irony of today's situation is that a pretense for American interference in Iraq was an alleged relationship between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda, the Sunni fundamentalist terrorist network that was responsible for the attacks on September 11, 2001. Despite assertions made by US Vice President Dick Cheney that an al-Qaeda-Iraq link existed, a declassified Pentagon report confirms that the former president had no relationship with the Sunni extremists.¹³ The Pentagon report is based on interrogations of the former president, two of his top aides and Iraqi documents seized by the US.

The September 11 Commission's 2004 report also found no evidence of a collaborative relationship between Saddam and al-Qaeda.

However, there is no denying al-Qaeda's presence in Iraq today, as one of many groups fighting against the US-led coalition as well as other Iraqis along sectarian lines. The December 31, 2006, execution of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, which occurred on the first day of the Muslim holiday, Eid al-Adha, cemented in many minds that the battle for Iraq was drawn by religious beliefs. His execution, caught on cameraphone, showed the trapdoor pulled on Hussein mid-prayers while his masked Shiite executioners told him to go to hell.¹⁴ Posters of Hussein made their way to the streets of Sunni neighborhoods across the Middle East, including Tariq al-Jdideh in Beirut and Tripoli in the north, labeling him a Sunni martyr, as many protested his execution, seen as exceptionally provocative because it occurred on an Islamic holiday.

As foreign fighters entered Iraq to combat sectarian and international foes, sectarian division flowed out of the country. Lebanon, with its sectarian government formation, was highly susceptible to the political divide. Initial outside speculation considered the 2006 Hezbollah border raid as a unity operation with Hamas combatants in Gaza after they also kidnapped an Israeli soldier in June (this Israeli soldier has also not yet been released). Political analysts argued that Hezbollah was trying to stretch Israeli forces to wage a two-front fight in solidarity with Hamas, but this theory was later rejected after Hezbollah leaders spoke openly about their mission.¹⁵ Nasrallah announced after the ceasefire that the idea had been raised before the events in Gaza and had he known the force of the Israeli response, he would not have supported the cross-border raid. However this did not stop him from declaring a "Divine Victory" over the Jewish state.

Early into the war, many Arab, Sunni-led governments condemned Hezbollah's actions. The regional aversion to Israel was overshadowed by Arab leaders' fear of creeping Shiite power, both from Iran and the possibility of revolt from their own Shiite populations. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia called it an "uncalculated adventure."¹⁶ This criticism also reflected a deeper fear within the pro-American Sunni crescent, which views Hezbollah as a

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tool to further Iranian influence in the region, that was not shared by the general public.

The normally restrained Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia protested for three days. More than 1,000 people rallied in downtown Cairo, burning Israeli and American flags. “Arab majesties, Excellencies and highnesses, we spit on you,” one banner read.¹⁷ Demonstrators held up a poster of Mubarak with a Star of David on his forehead, labeling him “the enemy of the Egyptian people.” Jordan and Kuwait, staunch American allies with a majority Sunni population, saw protesters on the streets siding with the Shiite fighters of Southern Lebanon. In 2002, a quarter of Jordanians were said to hold a favorable view of the United States. By 2004, the number had dropped to five percent.¹⁸

As their anger against Israeli and American policy in the Middle East swelled, protesters across the Middle East were also increasingly venting their frustration at their Arab rulers, especially in moderate countries whose governments have been reliable US allies. Such governments have been forced to amend their stance and praise Hezbollah.¹⁹

After the implementation of UN Resolution 1701, which called for a ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel, many Arab leaders were forced to bow to popular pressure and applaud Hezbollah’s conduct. Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit praised Hezbollah in an indirect way in an interview with Reuters on August 15, 2006, saying “[t]hey conducted themselves in a manner that showed their ability to resist and they fought with honor,” and adding that “the result after all is a disaster for Lebanon.”²⁰

“When Hezbollah did what they did in Lebanon in the summer, no one thought of it as a Shiite party; it was a nationalist party,” Taher Masri, a former Jordanian prime minister, told *The New York Times*.²¹ Hezbollah’s performance against Israel in July/August 2006 could have been seen as a much-needed morale booster for Arabs frustrated by international indifference, stagnant leadership, and pro-Israeli bias on the part of the West, especially the United States. However, the victory has since been manipulated into a sectarian weapon, showing the strength and desires of the underrepresented Shiite in the region and their growing reliance on Iran.

The Arab public, regardless of sect, quickly praised a new hero: Hezbollah leader Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah.²² Posters of the chubby-cheeked leader and flags bearing the yellow and green seal of Hezbollah popped up around Beirut neighborhoods that had been previously been viewed as hostile to the Shiite party. Hezbollah invited all to a “Divine Victory” rally on September 22, 2006. The Shiite group appeared to be at the height of its popularity, providing an alternative to the stagnant, corrupt, authoritarian Western-

allied Arab nations, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. The former Iranian Ambassador to Syria said that Hezbollah had two weapons in its arsenal—the physical rockets and “boldness and courage.”²³ Boldness and courage is aided extensively when you are backed with over 100 million dollars in annual support from Iran alone. Much more is thought to come from other foreign supporters.²⁴

Nasrallah took his party’s second military victory against Israel and did something unprecedented by an Arab resistance movement: he challenged the government head-on. Islamist groups had slowly been gaining seats and power through the trial runs of democracy in the region. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, although officially banned, won seats in the Egyptian parliament. Hamas legitimately won the Palestinian parliamentary elections in 2006. Hezbollah has two MPs in the Lebanese parliament and has long been respected not only as a resistance movement in Southern Lebanon but also as a political party since the end of the Civil War in 1990 when it chose to enter general elections rather than campaign for popularity outside the system.

In other explosive developments, formerly nuclear-free Middle Eastern nations are beginning to think about enrichment programs. King Abdullah II of Jordan told the Israeli daily *Haaretz* that his country would launch a civilian nuclear research program, following identical declarations by Egypt and other Gulf nations. “The rules have changed on the nuclear subject throughout the whole region,” King Abdullah II said, “Where I think Jordan was saying, ‘we’d like to have a nuclear-free zone in the area,’ after this summer [when Israel invaded Lebanon], everybody’s going for nuclear programs.”²⁵ The son of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, considered his potential successor, openly urged his country to develop a nuclear program, saying it would only be used to generate energy. Egypt signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 and ratified it in 1981.

Israel, which is not a party to the NPT, has long been suspected of having nuclear weapons, even though the government has never officially confirmed it. According to Israeli estimates, Iran will be able to produce a nuclear bomb by mid-2009 at the earliest, barring technological obstacles and foreign interventions. If Iran were able to purchase enriched materials from other countries, it could produce a nuclear bomb earlier than 2009.²⁶

But as more countries strive to go nuclear, the most glaring lesson learned from the summer of 2006 is that arms will not heal the political wounds festering throughout the region. And while political analysts and government officials in the region say the spreading Sunni leadership’s disillusionment with Shiites and their backers in Iran will benefit Sunni-led governments

and the United States, they and others worry that the tensions could start to “Balkanize” the region as they have in Iraq itself.

Israel and the US, on the other hand, continue to see the region in terms of security and the curbing of terrorism. New claims from Israeli generals and US officials say that possibly hundreds of trained al-Qaeda operatives arrived in Lebanon after the war. The claims cannot be proven but the linkage of al-Qaeda was what got the US involved in Iraq in the first place and it is not surprising if the terrorist network is extending to countries where America is lobbying for greater influence. Former President Jimmy Carter stated in August 2006 that “the worst ally Israel has had in Washington has been the George W. Bush administration, which hasn’t worked to bring a permanent peace to Israel,” (this was months before the release of his book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*). Carter charged that Bush encouraged the continuation of attacks on both sides.²⁷

While some American officials and Sunni leaders argue that increased tension leads to reduced Iranian influence, the evidence in Iraq proves that more often than not sectarian allegiances are hard to control and devoid of predictability. An Egyptian-government controlled satellite service, called Nilesat, has been broadcasting a television station across the Arab world that shows what is billed as heroic footage of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq: American soldiers being killed and wounded, and unflattering images of Shiite leaders.²⁸

CONCLUSION

“Well, here we two old terrorists are again!” Said Hammami [Palestinian Liberation Organization official] said, walking into my room at the Mount Royal.

“Neither of us seems to have been killed in the meantime,” I replied in the same vein.
— Uri Avnery, Israeli journalist and politician, 1982. ²⁹

If the months following the July/August 2006 War have compounded any truth on the Middle East, it is that there are no national or even bi-lateral conflicts, but a region drowning in unresolved disputes that involve not only neighboring countries but the US and European nations as well.

Most national Arab armies have learned, by means of humiliating defeats, not to challenge Israel militarily. The military success of Hezbollah during the 2006 war wounded Israel’s image and exposed the Jewish state’s weakness to non-state actors. As long as Arab governments continue to fail to reach any peace agreement with Israel over the question of Palestine, an agreement that will be impossible as long as Israel and the West refuse to

engage democratically-elected Hamas politicians in serious peace talks, the power of and support for non-state actors, such as Hezbollah and the armed branch of Hamas, will inevitably increase on the Arab street.

Hezbollah and Hamas, resistance movements to their followers and terrorist organizations to their enemies, both have seats in government and military strength. As long as the US and Israel continue to see them only as armed threats, no olive branch will be found. Undoubtedly, both groups have used terror in a campaign they believed was liberating their land. Both groups have also tried to use elections to the same end, unlike al-Qaeda's network which remains a threat to both Arab governments and the Western nations that support them. By engaging willing non-state actors, rather than shunning

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them, and acknowledging their street credibility among Arab locals, the West would find itself living in a safer world, one where the threat from al-Qaeda would be minimized once real political grievances can no longer be used by the terrorists to fight in the name of a warped perception of Islam.

Due to the ongoing political deadlock in Lebanon, it becomes easy for the Lebanese to forget the position their nation, smaller than the state of Connecticut, plays on the greater Middle East chessboard. Lebanon's political problems are not isolated, and the 2006 Summer War was no exception. It would however be just as misleading to attempt to package all the regional problems into a polarized US-Iranian discourse. The 2006 Summer War was the latest violent manifestation of an old problem: most simply, the need for the golden egg of peace and stability in the Middle East.

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