

The War of Fog

So, what has this war brought us?

The conflict between Israel and Hezbollah of July and August is in desperate need of interpretation. Never has an Israeli war ended so ambiguously. In the interest of clearing the fog, we offer the following tally, one which may allow us to reach provisional conclusions without waiting for the results of commissions of inquiry, the state comptroller, or the next round of elections. We begin with the bad news, and then move on to the good—which, we suggest, ultimately wins out.

The bad news: 1. At the beginning of the campaign, Israeli leaders asserted, vocally and repeatedly, that the campaign would not end until all its objectives were achieved. To wit: (i) Israel would secure the release of the two kidnapped soldiers; (ii) Israel would expel Hezbollah from Lebanon (later, this promise was changed to “significantly disarm,” and then finally, to “move out of rocket range”); (iii) Israel would restore its military deterrent capability in the region, which has been substantially eroded over the last decade and more. Having roused among Israelis the conviction that the war would rightfully be Israel’s final confrontation with Hezbollah, the country’s leaders set them up for a grave disappointment: The terrorist army and its leadership were left unvanquished and none of the objectives declared so unequivocally at the beginning of the war were accomplished. The result has been a sense of having lost, of catastrophe reminiscent of the debacle of the opening days of the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

2. The much-touted UN Security Council resolution 1701 has, just weeks later, proven about as effective as previous resolutions calling for Hezbollah's disarmament: The new, improved UNIFIL force will be another symbolic gesture, and there is no reason to believe that the Lebanese army will either disarm the terror group or enforce an arms embargo against it. Hezbollah is rearming and regrouping as we speak. In his landmark essay in *Foreign Affairs* in 1999, Edward N. Luttwak noted the following about such resolutions:

Cease-fires and armistices have frequently been imposed under the aegis of the Security Council in order to halt fighting.... But a cease-fire tends to arrest war-induced exhaustion and lets belligerents reconstitute and rearm their forces. It intensifies and prolongs the struggle once the cease-fire ends—and it does usually end.

As the war progressed, Israel was depleting Hezbollah's store of weapons and fighters at a rate significantly higher than the reverse. By bringing the war to a premature pause, it seems unlikely that a long-term good will have been achieved. If anything, the next round will be longer and more brutal because of it.

3. By failing to achieve a swift, decisive victory, Israel revealed a series of deep flaws in its military. If reports are to be believed, these flaws ranged from the preparedness of commanders, regular soldiers, and reservists; to intelligence failures in underestimating the enemy's capabilities in weaponry, intelligence, and tactics; to command-and-control problems resulting in scrambled supply lines and the failure to deliver timely intelligence to the field; to incompetence at the highest ranks of command. Because too few soldiers were sent in early on, and because of years of investment on the part of the enemy, this battle was a far fairer fight than most Israelis had thought possible. As Martin Kramer correctly observes in this issue, the surprising lack of potency in Israel's military figures negatively into America's calculation of Israel's value as a strategic asset, encourages Israel's enemies, and undermines the average Israeli's faith in the military. (There is good news

here as well: If we had to discover such problems, it is best that it happened sooner rather than later.)

4. The failure of will on the part of Israel's leadership has engineered a profound political crisis for Israelis at a very bad time. We are, in many respects, still in the middle of a war—one that could resume of its own accord, or could be triggered by unilateral action against Iran. Israelis are hurting from the sense that a month of dislocation and destruction may have been in vain. It is not a good time for an election, yet Israelis' faith in their leaders is in a nosedive. This is bad for democracy, for it risks making voters feel impotent and disaffected.

Now, the good news: 1. For all that has been said about the IDF's failure, it is important to recognize the military blow sustained by Hezbollah, one which had no parallel on the Israeli side. This group has spent the last six years, and hundreds of millions of dollars in Iranian money, building its missile capability, its system of bunkers, and its weapons stores for a future war with Israel. In provoking Israel to a premature conflict, much of that investment has been erased, including the strategic threat of longer-range missiles, as well as hundreds of its best fighters. In the midst of an escalating nuclear confrontation with Tehran, Iran's most effective means of fomenting crisis and disorder in the region has been substantively impaired. In the meantime, Hezbollah has brought untold harm to its Lebanese host, undercutting its support among the populace. This was borne out most vividly in the August 28 speech of the group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, who very nearly apologized to the Lebanese population for the horror he had wrought; his claim that "had we known that the captive operation would result in such a war, we would not have carried it out at all" is remarkably uncharacteristic of an Arab leader claiming victory.

2. The war has laid bare the folly of unilateral withdrawal. The central policy upon which the ruling party ran during the last election was a continuation of the 2005 disengagement from Gaza, which was itself a continuation of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon six years ago. What has emerged from the current war is a sudden awareness among most Israelis

that just as the earlier withdrawal may have inspired the Palestinian Intifada of September 2000, so too might the withdrawal from Gaza last year have led to both the rise of Hamas and the war with Hezbollah. Suddenly, the proposal to undertake a third withdrawal, from most of Judea and Samaria, has lost nearly all public support, and the government has wisely shelved it. Israelis have discovered a primary law of geopolitical struggle: Withdrawal is oftentimes exceptionally hard to distinguish from retreat, at least in the eyes of one's enemy. Its foremost consequence is to embolden the enemy and to encourage further aggression. If the Palestinian war of September 2000 led Israelis to abandon the Oslo paradigm, according to which one may sate one's enemy by giving him power and support until he "has too much to lose" in fighting you, the Lebanese war of 2006 has led to a similar abandonment of unilateralism, according to which one may quell one's enemy by ceding strategic assets in a spirit of indifference.

3. The West as a whole, and Israel in particular, has emerged with a far clearer understanding of who, exactly, the enemy is. Iran's establishment of Hezbollah as a proxy army—a well-oiled military specializing in guerilla tactics, rather than just another "terrorist organization"—has made clear that what we have here is not simply a collection of loosely affiliated groups filled with loathing for the U.S. and Israel. Rather, it is a situation much more reminiscent of the cold war, in which Iran, the regional power, attempts to conquer the West via Soviet-style proxies: Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Shi'ite insurgents in Iraq, to name a few. True, in every case the conflict emerged in its own context, sometimes without Iranian involvement. But today, all these groups seem to be taking orders, directly or indirectly, from Tehran. How long this has been the case is hard to say, but it seems that far more Westerners, including Europeans, understand this than ever before. This kind of clarity is the key to defeating the enemy, who uses conceptual ambiguity as a strategic weapon.

4. Beyond all this, however, the war revealed something of inestimable value: A resilience among Israelis that neither its friends nor its enemies counted on. While the Lebanese, along with the Arab world more broadly,

reacted with uncertainty toward Hezbollah's aggression, Israelis were unified to a remarkable degree. At the height of the conflict, poll after poll showed over ninety percent support for the government's decision to launch the campaign and the war's continuation. Day after day, Israeli television showed interviews with the most stricken citizens of the North, huddled in bomb shelters, calling upon the government to continue fighting until the enemy had been routed. And this overwhelming support continued until Israel held its fire.

This must have come as a shock to Israel's enemies. It is a longstanding myth among Muslim radicals that Western democracies possess an inherent weakness: That their love of commerce and bourgeois pleasure will inevitably render them incapable of standing up for their own way of life; that the determination and purity of the jihad will defeat the morally flaccid, potbellied bobos of Brussels and Brookline. Yet time after time this belief is proven wrong. Even if democratic leaders sometimes show faintness of heart, democratic *peoples* are frequently willing to endure hardship, and to fight ferociously, to defend their freedom. This point was made definitively by Yagil Henkin, writing in our Spring issue, months before the war erupted:

If both political leaders and public opinion are convinced of the rightness and necessity of war, it is extremely difficult to withstand the wrath of a democratic country. The staying power of such countries does not depend on the damage they suffer in human lives and property. Their power lies in what defines their very existence—their belief in democratic values and their wish to protect them.

The determination of the Israeli public to lay aside decades of ideological turmoil—to forget the divisive pain of the Rabin assassination, the uprooting of the communities of Gaza, and the broken dreams of land and peace—and unite in defense of the Jewish state and its values against a deadly enemy was nothing short of breathtaking. And it withstood the hardship of war, the destruction of hundreds of homes, and the loss of life among our soldiers and citizens. This should serve as

a lesson for all democratic countries, in a just struggle that is only getting started.

True, this war was not fought well. Negligence, inexperienced leadership, and unreasonable expectations caused Israel to squander an opportunity for positive change in the region. Yet as harsh as the surprises for Israel may have been, it is the Iranians and their allies who should be most concerned about how the war played out. Governments dissolve into the night, while the people they represent sometimes show shades of eternity.

For years now, it has been said that Israelis are a tired people—tired of ideologies, tired of fighting, and tired of dying for their country. It has been said, moreover, that the democratic nation state is a thing of the past, that the fight for liberty is a chimera, and that Zionism will be soon forgotten. For a few weeks this summer, our enemies made the mistake of believing it.

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