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After Lebanon

The coalition's challenges

by Dr Emanuele Ottolenghi

Introduction

The Second Lebanon War dominated the news over the summer and re-conditioned Israel's political arena. The manifold repercussions could lead to the early demise of the barely four-month old government led by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

This article assesses the present state of Israeli politics in light of the crisis, beginning with an assessment of the war aims against the backdrop of the achievements and failures incurred by each side. The implications of this conflict will then be analysed with particular regard to the future of Olmert's Convergence Plan, the life expectancy of the current coalition and the future of peace negotiations in this climate.

The Second Lebanon War: who won, who lost and at what cost?

There is a common misconception that Hezbollah won the war. Israel failed to obtain a decisive victory over Hezbollah, who inflicted heavy damage over Israel's northern region and whose mobile rocket units could still hit Israel with Katyushas on the last day of the month-long campaign. However, given the admission by Hezbollah's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, that the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers was a miscalculation, and given that from very early on in the war Hezbollah kept pressing for a ceasefire, the picture that emerges from the conflict is in fact more complicated.

Israel's objectives – to destroy Hezbollah and force the implementation of UN Resolution 1559 – may not have been realistic. But the achievements Israel can mention at the end of the hostilities are not to be underestimated. Iran's deterrence vis-a-vis the West was diminished: there were suggestions that Iran had built up Hezbollah's military capabilities to use against Israel in the event of Israeli airstrikes against Iranian nuclear installations. Israel inflicted a heavy blow to Hezbollah's strategic arsenal, scoring important points on a political and diplomatic level. Israel has restored a certain amount of deterrent effect especially vis-a-vis Damascus and Tehran.

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Israel's combat doctrine proved inadequate to defeat Hezbollah decisively

Nevertheless, the war highlighted severe problems for Israel's fighting capabilities; it exposed leadership failures at the political level and logistical and conceptual failures at the military level. The home front was not sufficiently prepared to sustain a month of heavy barrage. Shelters were not ready. Supply lines for soldiers did not always work properly. But most importantly, Israel's combat doctrine, built mainly on the lessons learned during its five-year war of attrition against Palestinian militant groups, proved inadequate to fight and defeat Hezbollah decisively.

The fact that Israel destroyed most of Hezbollah's long-range rockets and rocket launchers within the first week of fighting is therefore overshadowed by the shortcomings of Israel's war machine and the psychological impact that Hezbollah's sustained rocket barrage over northern Israel has had on the public.

This is compounded by the keen public awareness of failures in the way the political and military leadership conducted the war – something that leaves Israelis wondering whether those who govern them and to whom they entrust their security are up to the task. The exposure of the Chief of Staff's decision to sell his stock portfolio on the day that two Israeli soldiers were kidnapped by Hezbollah highlighted this problem. Together with this news, came the announcement that both the President and the Justice Minister were under investigation for sexual harassment and that the Chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee is also under investigation, as may soon be the Prime Minister, for alleged financial improprieties. The exposure of these alleged scandals is bound to further damage the credibility of a leadership already compromised by the conduct of the war.

Labor leader and Defence Minister, Amir Peretz, is not immune to this problem. Although he has no part in the sort of misdemeanours for which his political colleagues are being scrutinised, Peretz is under severe criticism for the conduct of the war. His lack of military experience is frequently cited and he may end up paying the price for the problems with the Lebanon campaign.

What remains of the Convergence Plan?

The continuous criticism of politicians for their responsibilities in the war – and the exposure of some for their alleged misdeeds – is an indication that the press has turned the tables on this government and, in expressing a widespread public feeling, demands at least a serious and independent inquiry on the war.

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Undoubtedly, the coalition is under strain. The financial costs of the war put a heavy burden on the budget, leaving Amir Peretz with a fractured party and an unpalatable set of choices. Many of his Labor MKs are firmly against the budget cuts needed to finance the war effort, however, the Defence ministry, at whose helm he stands, needs a bigger budget to address the logistical shortcomings of the war and to invest in preparations for the next possible rounds of conflict against Hezbollah. Peretz could fight a losing battle trying to increase taxes but that would not guarantee him party support or the defence budget, and could create increased public disaffection for Labor.

The Autumn battle over financial policy, which is always difficult for Israel's fragile coalitions, may prove to be the dealbreaker for the current government. In the meantime, the Lebanon war has already taken one important casualty: the Convergence Plan.

Since the Gaza disengagement in August 2005 – which serves as the model for the Convergence Plan in the West Bank – Israel has been under a constant barrage of Kassam rockets from the Gaza Strip. Whilst these rockets do not pose a serious strategic threat for the time being, it has not escaped Israelis attention that the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza left behind an increasingly unsettled and unstable environment, where predicted dividends for Israel failed to materialise. The kidnapping of an Israeli soldier on June 25 along the Gaza border highlighted the pitfalls of unilateralism. If that were not enough, Hezbollah's daring incursion into Israeli territory on 12 July further degraded the notion that unilateral withdrawal could promote peace. Six years after Israel withdrew from Southern Lebanon and retreated to the blue line in compliance with United Nations resolutions, Hezbollah not only failed to sue for peace but actively rearmed and launched an unprovoked aggressive attack against Israel's civilian infrastructure and population.

For Israelis, the past summer's events have important ramifications for the West Bank. If Israel were to withdraw in the absence of a peace accord, a similar scenario could quickly develop, where medium and long range missiles could be deployed by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, only this time with Israel's most populated areas well within range. If nothing else, the Second Lebanon War has therefore undermined any support for further withdrawals from the West Bank, leaving the door open only for a future agreement with a Palestinian partner who is capable of delivering Israeli security in exchange for the legitimate rights of the Palestinians being finally fulfilled.

Can negotiations replace unilateralism?

Those who are critical of disengagement from Gaza and of Israeli unilateralism in general, can be divided into two categories: the advocates of renewed dialogue with the Palestinians; and those who reject dialogue on account of the intransigence of the other side.

Those who are mistrusting of the Palestinians must be relieved to have seen the unilateral course defeated by the kind of circumstances they had predicted would follow disengagement. Nevertheless, they have hardly any reason to rejoice, given that their political vision offers little by way of moving forward. Unilateralism was born out of the failure of negotiations and the widespread feeling that Israel had no genuine partner for peace. If that assumption is still correct and if unilateralism is equally doomed, what remains is a fragile truce that will be frequently broken and which may well spill into evermore serious conflict.

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Those who advocate a renewal of negotiations therefore have a renewed momentum. Only a deal with a partner trusted to keep their end of the bargain can deliver Israel from the kind of scenario experienced this summer where a radical militia, having filled a vacuum left by a weak state, pursues its own independent anti-Israel agenda regardless of the government. Nevertheless, it is difficult to envisage who can take that role among Palestinians at this time. President Abu Mazen remains a credible interlocutor, but he is not yet in a position to regain full control of the peace agenda. Hamas' brief government has so far failed to eradicate corruption or to bring order and security to the street. Its international isolation has only compounded the problem and it leaves it in a weak position.

In September, Fatah and Hamas agreed in principle to form a National Unity government and for relations with Israel to be the sole responsibility of the Fatah ruled PLO. However, negotiations keep stalling in the face of Hamas refusal to comply with the Quartet's three conditions: recognition of Israel's right to exist, renouncing terror and respecting previous agreements. Weapon prices recently soared on the streets of Gaza, evidence that competing groups are amassing arsenals. With the spectre of civil war still looming, Israel may find that negotiations are not a risk worth taking at the moment. However, with Hamas weakened not only politically but also militarily by Israel's summer actions in Gaza (completely overshadowed in the media by the Lebanon war), the more pragmatic wings of the Palestinian political system may sense an opportunity.

Conclusion: will Olmert's government survive long enough to negotiate a deal with the Palestinians?

the coalition is wobbling. Its challenges are daunting

Regardless of considerations on the Palestinian side, Israel may soon be in a situation where it can not negotiate because it might itself lack a government. The coalition is wobbling. Its challenges are daunting – the budget, the commissions of inquiry on the war, public pressure and scandals – and its strength faltering. The fledgling Kadima party might not survive the storm. Many of its politicians, may calculate that their future is no longer assured, and might seek a return to their previous political homes (mainly the Likud party which is rising in the polls).

There is something like a pre-election atmosphere in Israel, and a war with no heroes and no winners cannot possibly leave the leadership unshaken. By the time the Palestinians come around to some kind of agreement and joint position to reopen a political dialogue with Israel, it is possible that Israel's government will require a renewed mandate to negotiate further ■

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