

International Security Monthly Briefing – August 2006

THE LEBANON AFTERMATH

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Afghanistan and Iraq

During August the security situation in both Afghanistan and Iraq deteriorated further, in spite of efforts by the United States and its partners to stabilise the situation in both countries. In Afghanistan, substantial military operations were mounted by NATO in the south of the country to try and contain an expansion in Taliban activity and influence. There was little indication of success with these attempts, and two more general factors gave increasing cause for concern. One was the early indication that the 2006 opium poppy harvest would be the largest ever, providing more financial resources not just for the drugs trade and related warlords, but also for the Taliban and other militias. Given that the majority of all opium is now refined into heroin and morphine within Afghanistan, the potential for an improved financing of the insurgency is clear.

The second factor was the increasing concern at the high levels of corruption within the Afghan government, coupled with a decline in support for President Hamid Karzai by international non-governmental organisations and even by donor governments. Many analysts believe that it is not entirely fair to blame Mr Karzai, given the conspicuous lack of help with security provided to Afghanistan in the crucial period of 2002-03, but the effects of ongoing corruption have been to undermine governmental authority. It even seems possible that in some parts of Afghanistan there is growing support for Taliban elements since the areas under their control demonstrate a higher level of order and security, even if the methods used are frequently extreme.

In Iraq, the level of civilian casualties has increased substantially, especially in the region of greater Baghdad. There is now a complex and insecure environment involving a continuing insurgency that is becoming increasingly enmeshed with severe sectarian violence. The death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the presumed al-Qaida associate, earlier in the summer was expected to damage the insurgency but it is clear that this has had little or no effect. At such it joins the many other instances that were expected to curtail the violence, ranging right back to the deaths of Uday and Qusay Hussein in July 2003, the detention of Saddam Hussein in December of that year, followed by changes in administration and the holding of elections in 2004 and 2005.

During August, US forces concentrated their efforts in the greater Baghdad area but there was little evidence that this, or the growth in the numbers of personnel in the Iraqi police and security forces, was having any impact. Indeed, in terms of casualties, the situation was worsening. Furthermore, a notable feature of the insurgency was the continuing rise in power and influence of the Shi'a cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, and the growth of his associated militia, the Mehdi Army. This group has previously had substantial conflicts with the US forces, notably in Najaf in 2004, and August saw a series of violent clashes suggesting a return to the tensions of mid-2004.

Even with the major problems in Afghanistan and Iraq, though, the major emphasis in recent weeks has been on the closing stages of the second Lebanon War, the ensuing ceasefire and the implications of the outcome of the war.

Lebanon – War Termination

The crucial period in the Lebanon war was the first week in August. The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) had earlier experienced three surprising reversals in the latter part of July (see July briefing, *A Third War*). One was the unexpected attack on the modern *Saar-5* class missile corvette fired from a shore-based launcher, a second was Hezbollah's capacity to launch as many as a hundred unguided missiles across the border into Northern Israel every day for weeks on end and the third was the tenacity and capability of the Hezbollah paramilitaries when engaging IDF infantry and armoured vehicles.

Even so, as the briefing made clear, by the end of the month the Olmert government in Israel was still determined to resist international calls for a ceasefire. Much of the pressure came from the political impact of TV coverage of civilian casualties in Lebanon and the considerable damage being done to the Lebanese economic infrastructure, but it was also clear that Israel was under no pressure whatsoever from its key supporter, the United States, to move towards a ceasefire. The Bush administration had been uncompromising in its support for Israel in seeking to terminate the power base of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and there were clear indications that the administration saw Israel's conflict with Hezbollah in a much wider regional context.

From Washington's standpoint, Hezbollah was little more than a surrogate for Syria and, especially, Iran. There was real concern that the continuing power and influence of Hezbollah, both in southern Lebanon, the Beka Valley and parts of Beirut, as well as within the broader Lebanese political system, meant that Tehran had considerable leverage, stretching right up to the border with Israel. Given the long-standing US concern with Iran as being a core member of the axis of evil, the termination of Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon could be a powerful asset for US policy across the region, especially at a time of substantial difficulties in Iraq.

It was in this context that the first seven to ten days in August were so significant, not just for the status of Hezbollah and the Olmert government but for US policy in the region. In continuing fighting on the ground, and with a further intense period of Israeli air raids across Lebanon, it became clear by about 10 August that the IDF was having considerable difficulties in limiting the effectiveness of Hezbollah on three different counts.

One was that the considerable damage being done to the Lebanese infrastructure was simply not having the anticipated effect of turning the majority of Lebanese, especially Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims, against Hezbollah. Israeli planners appeared to have confidently expected that this would happen, but Lebanese public opinion actually moved in the opposite direction. The more Hezbollah demonstrated resistance to Israeli troops moving into southern Lebanon, the more people across much of the country saw Hezbollah as defending Lebanon.

The second factor related to the capabilities of the Hezbollah paramilitaries themselves. Time and again they proved able to resist the use of considerable force by Israel, exacting a toll on IDF units that was as severe as it was unexpected. It quickly became clear that Israeli military planners had made two serious errors. One was the belief that air power would have a major damaging impact on Hezbollah, limiting its capacity to engage with Israeli ground forces, and the second was a severe underestimate of the capabilities of the Hezbollah forces themselves.

The first error may well have stemmed from a belief in air power that draws partly on Israeli successes decades earlier, partly from the US experience in Iraq in 1991 and partly from the Israeli Chief of Staff being an Air Force general. In some ways the second error was more serious, given Israel's reconnaissance and electronic interception capabilities across southern Lebanon, coupled with its experience against Hezbollah paramilitaries in the mid-1980s. During that earlier period, following Operation Peace for Galilee and the siege of West Beirut in 1982, the IDF had found it so costly to

maintain an occupation of southern Lebanon in the face of guerrilla action that it withdrew to a narrow border area by 1985, finally withdrawing entirely in 2000.

Little appears to have been learnt by the IDF from that experience. Moreover, in the following five years, Hezbollah was able to construct a formidable set of defensive positions, mainly underground, and to train dedicated guerrilla groups that were largely self-supporting and organised in a cell-structure rather than in a more traditional military hierarchy. Most of the Hezbollah paramilitaries were local people who knew their territory intimately, had strong community support and were hugely dedicated to their cause.

They were also well-trained and had access to a range of weapons, especially modern portable anti-armour missiles. Many of these had a high level of capability against Israeli armoured personnel carriers and reconnaissance vehicles, and some of them had modern shaped charges or two-stage warheads, capable of penetrating the formidable armour of the Israeli Merkava main battle tank. Where the Hezbollah militia proved particularly effective was in their ability to use anti-tank weapons against Israeli troops when they set up locations in buildings, even just for a few hours at a time. Hezbollah militia were able to emerge from bunkers, engage Israeli troops when least expected and stage effective attacks using these missiles.

The third difficulty being experienced by the Israelis by early August was the continuing stream of missiles being fired into northern Israel. These were hitting targets south of Haifa and were affecting close to two million Israelis, severely limiting economic activity and causing many Israelis to live in shelters or else move to central and southern parts of the country.

It is probably correct to say that the Israeli Air Force was able to disable a number of the longer-range Zilzal missiles launchers available to Hezbollah and this might have prevented missile attacks as far south as Tel Aviv, but the fact that a large part of Israel was still within range had a profound political impact. Bearing in mind the memories of the Iraqi Scud attacks of 1991, the real problem for the Israelis was the inability of the IDF to counter the effect this time round. Most of the rockets were short-range, unguided and of limited impact, but their symbolic effect was considerable. Israelis felt vulnerable, many lost faith in their government and many were critical of the leadership of the armed forces, even if the ordinary IDF soldiers retained considerable support.

Ceasefire and Afterwards

The combination of difficulties experienced by Israel meant that by 10 August there was a tacit acceptance of the need for a ceasefire and the insertion of a large UN buffer force, and this was agreed by 14 August even if there was a two-week period before key countries such as France and Italy confirmed their willingness to contribute troops.

It is worth noting the fact that Israel was, under these difficult circumstances, even willing to accept a UN force. Traditionally, Israel has been highly dubious of the relevance of the United Nations. It has been cursory in its treatment of UN resolutions, has been contemptuous of the limited UNIFIL observer operation in southern Lebanon and has been deeply suspicious of the continuing support that the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has given to Palestinian refugees for several decades. In spite of this history, the Olmert government was willing to accept what amounted to a UN solution to its difficulties. This alone gives an indication of the extent to which the 2006 Lebanon War was a reversal for Israel.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah was able to claim the outcome as a victory, in spite of the heavy losses that it undoubtedly suffered. The fact that its militia were able to survive for close to five weeks was, from its own perspective, a conspicuous achievement, no less than that it was able to launch the largest number of missiles into Israel on the last day before the ceasefire took effect. Moreover, using financial resources provided largely by Iran, Hezbollah was able to move rapidly into a major role in immediate

repair and reconstruction of houses, commercial premises and the more general infrastructure of southern Lebanon.

Looked at objectively, the extent of Hezbollah's survival is remarkable, and does have longer-term implications. Israel had total control of the air, had sea control of the approaches to Lebanon and had an impressive concentration of UAV drones that could observe southern Lebanon on a 24/7 basis. It had a wide range of munitions available including precision-guided bombs, area-impact munitions such as cluster bombs and earth-penetrating warheads for destroying underground bunkers. It also had a formidable concentration of ground-based artillery, some of the world's most heavily armed, and armoured, main battle tanks, and an army that combined professional forces with large numbers of experienced reservists. Despite all of these capabilities, the IDF failed to take over and control even a 30-kilometre belt of southern Lebanon.

For much of the last 58 years Israel has relied on conventional deterrence through very powerful military forces to ensure its security. There have been reversals, not least at the start of the 1973 Yom Kippur/Ramadan War and the 1982-5 occupation of southern Lebanon, but for the most part this form of deterrence has been presumed to be effective. The Lebanon War of 2006 casts considerable doubt over this presumption, and this was quickly recognised by leaders in Syria and Iran, and more widely across the Middle East and beyond.

The Global Perspective

Towards the end of the month, the political run-up to the US Congressional elections of November 2006 was combining with the impending five-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Having lost substantial domestic support and with the Iraq War increasingly unpopular, the Bush administration also faced the aftermath of the Lebanon War and a confident Iran that was clearly not prepared to abide by UN Security Council demands to halt uranium enrichment.

In these circumstances, President Bush, Vice-President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and others went on the offensive in a sustained campaign to link Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and al-Qaida in a single phenomenon of Islamofascism that was presented as a threat to the United States that was as great as Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union. In particular, they sought to make the point that the Global War on Terror had now been transformed into the Long War, and that the United States was engaged a conflict that represented a fundamental and persistent danger to its interests.

In doing so, they were helped by the discovery in Britain of an alleged plot to destroy a number of civil airliners en route from Britain to the United States. This was seen as proof of the continuing threat to the US, with some suggestions being made that the plot could have caused "unimaginable" loss of life, presumably greater even than the 9/11 attacks.

Whatever the eventual outcome of any legal action in this matter, the political intention in the United States was to point to the risks being faced and the essential nature of the continuing military response. Beyond this, though, was the unsubtle and clear implication that any opposition to the conduct of the Long War, including any talk of a timetable for troop withdrawals from Iraq, was deeply unpatriotic, almost to the point of treason.

In the heated atmosphere of the run-up to the November elections it is likely that this approach will persist for the next two months. Whether there is any change in policy after that remains to be seen, and developments in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and Lebanon may all be relevant. For now, though, there seems little sign of change.

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