

The Middle East and World Politics in the Aftermath of Israel's War in Lebanon

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The aftermath of Israel's war against Lebanon has transformed not only the Middle East but also world politics. The sharpest expression of this is that Iran—the backer of the war's victor, Lebanon's right-wing Hezbollah—has succeeded in reasserting its power in the Middle East at U.S. expense.

Whereas a few months ago the Bush administration insisted that it would get the UN to impose sanctions against Iran if it didn't suspend its uranium enrichment program, Iran has so far succeeded in avoiding sanctions by making use of the growing differences between the U.S. and other nations on the UN Security Council. Faced with growing reluctance on the part of Russia and China and even its European allies to agree to sanctions, the administration suddenly announced in mid-September that it is willing to defer its drive for sanctions if Iran suspends uranium enrichment for two months.

One report noted, "The apparent shift in the American stance reflects the hard realities that there are few good options on Iran" at a moment when Iran's stature has been raised in the region in the aftermath of Israel's debacle in Lebanon (Helene Cooper, "Rice Indicates Shift in Stance on Iran Sanctions," New York Times, 9/12/06).

RESULTS OF LEBANON WAR

Today's world certainly looks very different than before Israel's invasion of Lebanon in mid-July.

Israel dropped a greater tonnage of bombs on Lebanon in its four-week campaign than during its entire 1982 invasion of that country. Its effort to destroy Lebanon's infrastructure and terrorize its population included dropping 1,800 cluster bombs, containing over 1.2 million bomblets—40% of which failed to explode and will threaten the lives of Lebanese civilians for years to come. Its campaign led to the deaths of over a thousand civilians, while a quarter of the nation's populace became homeless.

Despite this massive onslaught, Israel failed to achieve a single tactical or strategic goal. It failed to destroy or dismember Hezbollah. It failed to get the international community to rein in Hezbollah. The UN resolution that ended the fighting provides no mechanism for disarming it, despite the fact that the U.S. had initially insisted on such disarmament as a precondition of any ceasefire.

U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was forced to acknowledge in late August, “I don’t think there is an expectation that this UN force is going to physically disarm Hezbollah. You have to...hope that some people will lay down their arms voluntarily.” Hezbollah, of course, has no such intention.

Israel’s destruction of Lebanese cities and infrastructure has only succeeded in greatly strengthening Hezbollah, which is now distributing hundreds of millions of dollars in reconstruction aid to stricken communities, thanks to the largess of its main sponsor, Iran. As a result of its stiff resistance to Israel, Hezbollah has come out of the war as the most powerful political force in Lebanon.

This is a changed situation. Only a year ago Hezbollah’s popularity was in decline since it was the only party in Lebanon to oppose the mass movement calling for Syria to withdraw its troops, which had occupied parts of Lebanon since the 1970s. Hezbollah did poorly in the elections that followed Syria’s humiliating withdrawal in 2004. Yet all that has now changed.

THE ROAD TO WAR

How could Israel’s rulers be so foolish as to repeat the U.S.’s mistake in Iraq by presuming that a massive bombing campaign combined with a limited ground invasion could reshape a country? Part of the answer is that the U.S. coaxed Israel into the war to begin with.

The capture of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah in mid-July was hardly a cause for war. Such actions have occurred on the part of both sides for years. But the Bush administration was worried about growing Iranian influence and wanted to cut it down to size at a moment when its allies are not rushing to confront Iran. As a Bush official put it, “The Israelis told us [that invading Lebanon] would be a cheap war with many benefits...It would be a demo for Iran” (Seymour Hersh, “Watching Lebanon,” *The New Yorker*, 8/21/06).

Israeli Prime Minister Olmert also wanted to attack Lebanon as a way to detract attention from his violent crackdown against the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, where over 250

Palestinians have been killed since July. While the world's attention was on Lebanon, Israel placed Gaza under a siege that brought the Palestinian economy to its knees. Gaza's Gross Domestic Product, already one of the lowest in the region, has declined by another 25% because of Israel's actions.

“Disproportionately” is hardly a strong enough word to describe Israel's murderous assaults in Gaza and Lebanon in response to border strikes by Hamas and Hezbollah. For every Israeli civilian killed by Hezbollah's Iranian-, Russian- and Chinese-built rockets during the Lebanon war, 30 Lebanese civilians were killed by Israel's attacks. Israel also made widespread use of phosphorus shells which cause severe burns and a slow, painful death. Their use is prohibited by international law.

Israel's barbaric actions by no means excuse the actions of Hezbollah which engaged in plenty of atrocities of its own—such as firing thousands of rockets into Israeli civilian areas packed with ball bearings intended to cause as much destruction of innocent human life as possible.

Despite Israel's inhumane actions, Israel's “Peace Now” movement supported the war, as did most of the country's left-leaning activists and intellectuals—leaving the small number of Israelis who came out against the war largely isolated. However in the aftermath of Israel's military and political setbacks, growing numbers of Israelis are now questioning the entire rationale for the war.

THE REGIONAL IMPACT

Israel's Lebanon debacle further amplifies the U.S.'s quagmire in Iraq, where civil war is killing 100 people a day. The Shi'a militia of Muqtada al-Sadr and other reactionary groups have gained in strength. The U.S. is between a rock and a hard place. If it withdraws from Iraq, its power and prestige will plummet, but if it remains in Iraq, it faces the awesome task of controlling a disintegrating country.

In the face of this, no one is any longer talking about bringing “liberal democracy” to the Middle East. Israel's defeat in Lebanon has put the final nail in the coffin of Bush's illusion that he could remake the Middle East simply by taking down Saddam Hussein's hated regime in Iraq. And as a result, the U.S. will now face more opposition from other state powers—as seen in Russia's refusal to support sanctions against Iran's nuclear programs.

Yet the horrible crisis facing us today is told in the fact that even when U.S. and Israeli imperialism suffers a major defeat, it still is no cause for celebration since thoroughly reactionary forces are being empowered by it.

This refers not just to Hezbollah but also to Iran, the real winner in the recent events. Iran's growing influence was seen when Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki (a U.S. ally) traveled to Iran in September for "friendly" discussions with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The latter stated after their meeting, "Even on security issues, there is no barrier [between us] in the way of cooperation."

For the first time since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, a state opposed to the U.S.—Iran—has succeeded in supplanting some of the U.S.'s power in the Middle East.

The outcome of the Lebanon war has also given Islamic fundamentalists throughout the Middle East a huge boost in mass support, increasing the possibility they may gain power one day in Egypt, Jordan, and/or Pakistan.

VOID IN IDEA OF FREEDOM

The clash between Israel and Hezbollah is part of a broader world conflict. The U.S. uses Israel to advance its drive for world dominance while Iran is using Hezbollah to create a "Shi'a Crescent" against the U.S. Yet we must not overlook a key fact—that Hezbollah takes as its model not Al Qaeda but rather the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

Al Qaeda arose from a defeat suffered by the fundamentalists in places like Algeria and Egypt. Lacking a mass base and suppressed by various regimes, Al Qaeda was taken in by the Taliban in Afghanistan. But the Taliban itself was hated by most Afghans, which helps explain why the U.S. was able to overthrow it in 2002 with only 18,000 troops. Al Qaeda has kept itself alive since then and can still do considerable damage. But it is very different than Hezbollah.

Hezbollah didn't arise from a defeat but from a victory by Islamic fundamentalism—the 1979 Iranian Revolution. It has modeled itself on that revolution by trying to obtain a mass base. Its ability to do so explains its success against Israel. And its mass base is now getting stronger.

Yet the fact that a group has a mass base does not mean that it is deserving of support, even if engaged in "everyday resistance" against an occupying power. The content of the movement has to be measured against the idea of freedom—and if found wanting, it must be rejected. That is as true of Hezbollah as of parts of the Iraqi resistance, like Muqtada Al

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Sadr's militia in Iraq—even though it is largely composed of urban poor in areas that were once the strongholds of Iraqi communism.

That is why we insist that for Marxist-Humanists the point of departure is not everyday resistance or even mass struggles, but the self-determination of the idea, the philosophy of revolution, which provides the measure as to whether a movement or struggle is or is not part of the creation of a new society. It is because we take our point of departure from the idea of freedom that we firmly condemn those on the Left who now support Hezbollah.

During and after the Lebanon war large sections of the U.S. and European Left opposed Israel's attacks on Lebanon by uncritically praising Hezbollah—whose missiles deliberately targeted Israeli civilians—even though it is a pro-capitalist, right-wing organization that opposes women's rights, gay rights, and workers' self-emancipation. In England, Iranian dissidents opposed to their government who joined in anti-war protests were physically assaulted by supporters of Hezbollah and were told to leave the rallies by some English "leftists." In the name of opposing Israel, some have sunk so low as to insist on uncritical praise for Hezbollah and even Iran.

One left apologist of the fundamentalists is Tariq Ali, who writes: "A radical wind is blowing from the alleys and shacks of the latter day wretched of the earth" that is expressed in the "anti-imperialism" of Hamas and Hezbollah who "are responding to everyday needs." He acknowledges that this "Islamic voluntarism is not a stable alternative to creeping neo-liberalism...the limits of this radicalism, so long as it remains captured by the Koran, are clear enough" ("Mid-Point in the Middle East?" *New Left Review*, April 2006).

Ali fails to recognize that the problem isn't that the fundamentalists are "captured by the Koran." It's that they are captured by a highly regressive, reactionary, misinterpretation of the Koran that is a product of capitalist modernity. Ali thinks that the problem with Hamas or Hezbollah is that they lack "leaders comparable to [Hugo] Chavez or [Evo] Morales"—as if it's the lack of such leaders, instead of their reactionary ideology, that opposes women's rights, workers' rights, socialism and democracy, that is the real problem!

As we have seen again and again, the battle between capitalism-imperialism and capitalism-fundamentalism leaves little room for independent thought, as leftists line up to support the latter in opposing the former.

Lebanese writer Hazem Saghieh argued, "It would be better if the Left...grasped the specificity of the situation it is dealing with, rather than contenting itself with

generalizations motivated only by hatred of American foreign policy and sometimes of America itself... If Karl Marx would have known that his followers had donned Iranian clerics' robes, he would be turning in his grave" ("How the European Left Supports Lebanon," Open Democracy, 8/4/06).

THE WAY FORWARD

The absolute opposite of the position of leftists who tail-end reactionary fundamentalism is not to say "a plague on both your houses," however. Simply declaring opposition to both Israel and Hezbollah is not a valid position because it only states what one is against without ever specifying what one is for and thereby does nothing to point the way to the uprooting of capitalism.

Simply condemning Israel and Hezbollah doesn't even distinguish one from the position of bourgeois groupings. In Lebanon among the main opponents of Hezbollah have been capitalist moguls who, until 2004, were led by former Premier Rafik Hariri, a billionaire who rebuilt much of Lebanon through cheap labor and Saudi oil money. Hariri's well-heeled followers detest Hezbollah since its patron, Syria, murdered Hariri in 2004. Yet they also now detest Israel since it has destroyed Lebanon's infrastructure. Simply saying down with Israel and Hezbollah doesn't even distinguish one from the position of Lebanese capitalists.

Even more crucial, a position of "a plague on both your houses" ignores the need to have all perspectives begin from a concept of a totally new society. Here is how we expressed this after the September 11, 2001 attacks:

"The reason so many despair of the struggle for freedom and turn to patriotism, xenophobia and statism is that they see no liberatory alternative to capitalism. Instead of responding to each political crisis by repeating the same old slogans against 'U.S. imperialism,' revolutionaries have a responsibility to oppose all societies and tendencies based on alienated human relations while projecting a positive vision of a new society, what Karl Marx called 'positive humanism, beginning from itself'.... We live at a moment when political opposition must have a total view in order to be effective."

The work we have been engaged in to make Marx's Critique of the Gotha Program our ground for organization is integral to this. Our effort to grasp, internalize, and develop Marx's concept of a new society—both his final goal of "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs" and his notion of what steps are needed to make that a reality—is a direct follow-through and concretization of our effort to respond to the

void in the idea of freedom that has been especially evident since September 11, 2001. (See “Demonstrating an alternative to capitalism,” page 5.)

MARXIST-HUMANIST PERSPECTIVES

In sum, Israel’s murderous invasion of Lebanon and its ongoing attacks against the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank must be totally opposed, and totally opposed not by supporting Hezbollah, Hamas, or Iran, but by working to make the content of Marx and Marxist-Humanism’s notion of a new society real for today’s forces of liberation. Anything short of that, including “a plague on both your houses,” is retrogressive.

An alternative to capitalism cannot be developed on the basis of empty-minded slogans or inchoate feelings and intuition. It requires making full use of dialectical reason in working through the logic of the concept. Never has it been more urgent to concretize the creativity of cognition, whether in regard to crises in the Middle East or anywhere.

As the Marxist-Humanist Perspectives for 2006-2007 puts it, “No one has a crystal ball as to how to create the social relations that Marx outlined as needed in the aftermath of a social revolution. Neither a program nor a blueprint can bring it into reality. But the radical movement has greatly suffered from failing to take off from and further develop the principles outlined in Marx’s Critique of the Gotha Program. This has left a void that is being filled by false alternatives like market socialism, statism or anarchism. None can answer the pressing question of whether humanity can be free from capitalist value production, racism, sexism, and dehumanized, thingified relations of everyday life.

“We aim to help fill the void on the question of ‘what happens after’ by creatively rethinking and restating his concept of ‘revolution in permanence’ for today, and by making Marx’s Critique of the Gotha Program our ground for organization. In taking this as our core organizational perspective, we seek to get others thinking about these concepts by going to their meetings, writing to their publications, and engaging in dialogue with all whom we can reach.” (For the full thesis, see [News & Letters, August-September 2006](#).)

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