

Some Regional Implications of the Hizbullah-Israel War

(August 4, 2006)

Israel Elad Altman*

The war between Hizbullah and Israel, which broke out on July 12, is not over at the time of writing, yet the regional implications of Hizbullah's ability to keep fighting and bleeding Israel for so long can already be pointed out:

- A new realignment of forces takes shape between Arab Sunnis and Shi'is, as Sunnis mobilize to support Hizbullah.
- One can expect an increase in the motivation of radical Sunni Islamist organizations to carry out anti-Israeli and anti-American terrorist operations.
- The failure of the secular, pro-Western Arab regimes to lead the Arab side in this conflict has enabled Iran and the Arab Islamists to take the initiative, further weakening those regimes and empowering the Islamists, thus weakening Arab forces which accept Israel's existence and strengthening those who reject and struggle to end it.
- Growing pressures can be expected from the rank and file of mainstream Sunni Islamist movements on their leaders to shift from the present strategy of peaceful political struggle against those regimes to a violent one; so is a heightened risk for terrorist activities undertaken by overzealous elements in those movements.

When the fighting started, provoked by Hizbullah, the Saudi King spoke for other Sunni leaders as well when he condemned Hizbullah, and one of Saudi Arabia's most authoritative Islamic jurists followed suit by issuing an edict—*Fatwa*—forbidding Sunni support for Hizbullah. Clearly, the pragmatic, pro-Western Arab regimes resent the fact that the initiative on the Arab side of the Arab-Israeli conflict was wrested from them by Iran, through its proxy - Hizbullah. But beyond resentment they did little to regain the initiative, creating a void which is now filled by non-state Islamist movements. The latter take courage from Hizbullah's success where the armies of Arab (secular) states have failed, and see it as a vindication of the Islamist challenge to Israel.

Yet Hizbullah's success has also faced the Sunni Islamist movements with a challenge. One of the core concepts of Islamism is the identification of the true faith with success- military, political, and other. In fact, it was the bewilderment of Muslims over their inferiority in military, political, and other fields in the face of the West, which led them to the fundamentalist idea that their weakness is the result of their straying from true Islam. The fact that the Shi'is of the small Hizbullah organization managed to afflict upon Israel what the Sunni Arab armies have failed to do could be seen as a proof that true Islam is the one practiced by the Shi'is, those very Shi'is whom the Sunni jihadists in Iraq and their spiritual mentors label as infidels or apostates. The Sunni Islamists must therefore demonstrate that Sunnis too can fight the Israelis. At the least they must make sure that Hizbullah is not seen as fighting Israel alone, while the Sunnis let it down, and that they are not inferior to the Shi'is in defending Islam and Arab honor.

* Dr. Israel Elad-Altman is an analyst of Middle Eastern and Islamic affairs, and a senior research fellow in IDC, Herzliya, Israel

In his July 27, 2006 statement on the conflict, al-Qa'idah's Ayman al-Zawahiri seemed to be trying to appropriate Hizbullah's struggle by arguing that the conflicts and insurgencies in Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq were all parts of a single Jihad designed to push the U.S. and its allies out of Muslim lands. He also expressed support for Hizbullah and reiterated al-Qa'idah's position that Sunni-Shi'i differences must be subordinated to the need to form a unified movement to fight the US, Israel and the apostate Muslim regimes.

It was therefore not unexpected when the deputy chairman of al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyyah (the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood), Sheikh Ibrahim al-Masri, announced (July 29, 2006) that his movement had combatants fighting alongside Hizbullah and in coordination with it, defending Sunni villages in Southern Lebanon. Al-Masri dismissed apprehension voiced by Arab Sunni leaders regarding a Shi'i thrust across the Middle East and into Lebanon (the "Shi'i Crescent" thesis) , and expressed full solidarity with Hizbullah.

Simultaneously, leaders of several Sunni Islamist groups in Lebanon have formed a new coalition, "The Islamic Action Front", designed to serve as "a source of authority for the Sunni community". A senior figure in the new coalition declared that it considered itself to be "in one trench with Hizbullah" and that it would join the jihad if an Israeli invasion by land or sea took place. Jihad aside, the formation of the new body clearly reflects a need on the Sunnis' part to join forces in order to offset the growing political weight of the Shi'is due to Hizbullah's prowess.

The highest legal authority of the Muslim Brotherhood worldwide, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradhawi, came out (July 27, 2006) in support of Hizbullah, stating that its struggle is according to Islamic law a legal jihad; that the Shi'is are part of the Muslim nation; and that each Muslim was duty bound to help that resistance against Israel. He lashed at the Arab rulers for claiming that Israel is invincible and therefore should not be confronted, a position which gives Israel a free hand. "It is as though they tell Israel: Destroy our homes, violate our honor, and kill our children because we can not fight you", al-Qaradhawi said, and warned: "That bizarre situation will not last, since this is an age when peoples rise up against their rulers, and the Arab rulers will not be there forever, witness what happened to the Soviet Union". Such rhetoric, coming from a religious authority followed and respected by millions, will not solidify the legitimacy and stability of Arab regimes.

Al-Qaradhawi's comrade, Mahdi 'Akif, who is the General Guide of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and supreme leader of the Brotherhood's International Organization, declared (August 3, 2006) that he was ready to dispatch 10,000 jihadists to Lebanon to fight alongside Hizbullah. He too assailed Arab leaders for failing to stand up to Israel, than made a powerful point: "Islam regains today its role of leading the struggle against the Zionist-Western project... We understand the depth of the crime committed by most of our rulers during the years of this conflict [with Israel], when they implemented the Zionist-Western plan to fight the Islamists and exclude the Islamic vision by any means".

All of that could lead to increased motivation on the part of Sunni Islamist organizations to carry out terrorist attacks against Israel and the US. But it has a deeper meaning. The struggle against Israel and for the Palestinians has been since 1948 the central collective Arab cause. Rulers of

Egypt, Syria and Jordan during the 1948 war paid with their life or kingship for the Arab defeat in that war. By appropriating the role of leading the Arab-Muslim struggle against Israel, the Islamists merge their own cause with that of Palestine. The more that point takes hold in the Arab mind, the harder will it be for the Arab regimes to contain them, because any move taken by the regimes against the Islamists will automatically be seen as a move against the Palestinian cause. The harder too will it be for Arab regimes to maintain relations with Israel.

During the last three decades, Arab states have acted upon the assumption that Israel is a fact of life, for better or for worse, and that the conflict with her is about her borders (and the future of the Palestinian refugees), not about her very existence. That approach led to some of them signing peace accords with Israel, and to the Arab Initiative adopted by the March 30, 2002 Beirut Summit envisaging an eventual normalization of Arab relations with Israel provided the latter met certain conditions. Yet, initiative in the current conflict is firmly in the hands of Iran and the Arab Islamists, for whom the struggle is about Israel's very existence. Galvanized by Hizbullah's stand, by Hamas' undiminished capacity to launch rockets into Israel, by the Islamists' electoral achievements in Iraq, the Palestinian authority and Egypt, by Iran's defiance of the West and of Israel and by her nuclear promise, Arab opinion appears now to tilt back towards the old rejectionist approach, which seeks Israel's elimination and considers it achievable. That is a serious threat to Israel, Arab regimes and Western interests in the region alike.