

THE LEBANESE WAR OF 2006: REASONS AND CONSEQUENCES

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On 12 July 2006, Hizballah attacked an Israeli army convoy and killed three Israeli soldiers and captured two. The Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, called the attack an ‘act of war’. The event was followed by a 33-day long war between Israel and Lebanon, called as the ‘July War’ (*Harb Tammuz*), leaving 1,191 dead and several wounded in Lebanon and killing 119 soldiers and 43 civilians in Israel. The war left Lebanon devastated as the country was continuously bombed by Israeli aircraft, its vital infrastructure was destroyed and an air and sea blockade was imposed by Israel to stop any military deployments for Hizballah. The conflict ended on 14 August 2006, with the adoption of the UN Resolution 1701. This article aims at looking at the reasons of this war and analyzing its consequences. It argues how the two sides of the conflict (both Hizballah by capturing the soldiers and Israel by such a heavy retaliation) have misread each other’s domestic politics as well as the regional dynamics and miscalculated the consequences of their attacks.

Lebanese Politics Prior to July 2006 War

Lebanon has been shown as a model for tolerance and a proof of a working democratic, confessional system for decades after its independence with its 18 officially recognized sects. After its independence in 1943, the confessional system was set up, based on the 1932 census, which foresaw that the country's president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the parliament a Shi’a Muslim, giving the Christians that were the majority at the time of the census a superior role in the system. However, by late 1960s, the confessional system began to be questioned especially by the Muslim groups whose numbers were now more than the Christians and were calling for a reorganization of the representation system. Besides, the country has been caught up in the regional developments and became a hostage, especially from 1970 onwards, to the Arab-Israeli conflict that has made it, what Tom

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Najem has called, a ‘penetrated country’.¹ The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) had moved its headquarters to Beirut, after being expelled from Jordan in 1970. Its increasing attacks from southern Lebanon in raiding Israel brought in return massive Israeli retaliation. The beginning of the civil war in April 1975, that would last until 1989, further shattered the country.² Lebanese army was disintegrated during the civil war and almost each religious community formed their own militia which fought against the others. Syria was ‘invited’ into Lebanon by the Lebanese President Franjieh at the beginning of the civil war to intervene into the fighting. Syria accepted this invitation and occupied Lebanon from 1976 to 2005, except the south of the country, the so-called Red Line (mainly the Litani River).

As the attacks on Israel from Southern Lebanon intensified in March 1978, Israel invaded south Lebanon in an operation called Operation Litani. At this stage south Lebanon was mainly populated by the Shi’a Muslims, who were the most disadvantageous group in the country politically and economically. Although the Israeli forces withdrew within three months, they have formed a security zone in the south of the country under a proxy Lebanese militia, the South Lebanese Army (SLA) under Major Haddad’s control. With the Likud government in power and what to do with the occupied territories became a heated debate in Israeli politics, the increased fighting between PLO and Israel and SLA led to the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Israel, this time, aiming to eliminate the power of the PLO in Lebanon occupied the entire south, until Beirut, and besieged the city. Israel demanded the expulsion of the PLO men from Beirut, under the auspices of US-French-Italian peacekeeping force, while women and children continued to stay in the refugee camps in the city. In line with the Israeli aims, the PLO leadership was expelled from Beirut in August 1982. Israel withdrew its forces from central Lebanon in June 1985, but kept its occupation in the south until 2000.

¹ Tom Pierre Najem, “Lebanon and Europe: The Foreign Policy of a Penetrated State” in Gerd Nonneman (ed.) *Analysing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe*, London, Routledge, 2005, pp. 100-122.

² For a detailed analysis of the Lebanese civil war see Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation – Lebanon at War*, 3rd ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

Hizballah

Israel's 1982 invasion, although leading to the expulsion of PLO from the country, had set in motion a series of events that had strengthened the opposition against Israel in Lebanon and had been an important impetus in the creation of Hizballah.³ Hizballah was formed after the invasion Israel mainly to represent the Shi'a groups in Lebanon. The Shi'a groups were already feeling increasingly marginalized in the Lebanese political system during this period and Amal, its main militia, was becoming insufficient to represent its demands. Since its formation, Hizballah depended on Iran and Syria for financial support, arms, training, ideological and also spiritual guidance. Syrian military intelligence, under Ghazi Kanaan in Lebanon, had enormous influence on Hizballah's activities and Damascus was thought to be drawing the general guidelines of Hizballah activity and also setting limits for its operations. Hizballah was important for both Syria and Iran in their own 'fight' against Israel.

Hizballah has announced its *raison d'être* as the destruction of Israel, or what it called as the 'occupied Palestine'. This perspective is supported by the organization's 1985 Open Letter, which includes statements such as, "Israel's final departure from Lebanon is a prelude to its final obliteration from existence and the liberation of venerable Jerusalem from the talons of occupation".⁴ Although Hizballah was not alone in contesting the Israeli occupation in the south of the country, it took the lead in the 'fight' against Israel in Lebanon.

The Ta'if Accord

After a series of events that led to a political deadlock in 1988, the 1989 Ta'if Accord brought an end to the Lebanese civil war. The Accord called for demilitarization of all militia and withdrawal of all foreign forces. However, neither of these calls was fulfilled. On the contrary, the Accord itself underlined a strengthened role for Syria in Lebanese politics by empowering it to assist the Lebanese government in the implementation process and in a short time established a quasi-legal framework for Syrian

³ For more information about Hizballah see Judith Palmer Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*, London and New York, I.B.Tauris, 2005; Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion*, London, Pluto Press, 2002; Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon: The Politics of a Western Hostage Crisis*, Hampshire, Macmillan, 1997; Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story from Within*, London, Saqi, 2005.

⁴ For details see Lara Debb, "Hizballah: A Premier", *Middle East Report Online*, 31 July 2006. www.merip.org/mero/mero073106.html

dominance in Lebanese politics, especially in the security and foreign policy issues, leading many observers to question Lebanon's sovereignty.⁵ Syria was 'happy' with its presence and 'hegemony' in Lebanon mainly because such a position gave it important leverage over its own relations with Israel, in getting back the Golan Heights. General Aoun rebelled against this development. Lebanese army and Syrian troops took a decision to oust the General through a military operation. The conflict resulted in the defeat of the General at the end of 1990.⁶ The aim of demilitarization of all paramilitary groups was not fulfilled either. Although militias of the civil war joined the central army, Hizballah remained an exception and continued to keep its arms. The Ta'if Accord also reorganized the political system by increasing the representation of the Muslim groups in the Parliament. The first elections of the post-civil war Lebanon was held in 1992. Hizballah entered the 1992 elections as a political party. While keeping its weapons and continuing its operations against the Israeli occupation in the south of the country it also worked as a political party winning eight seats, giving it the largest single bloc in the 128-member parliament. With the additional four seats of its allies, its power was further strengthened in the Parliament. As a political party, it gained a reputation for being 'clean' and 'uncorrupt', increasing its popularity in the society. However, Hizballah operations from the south of the country into Israel and the following Israeli retaliation led to mixed feelings. Especially Israeli retaliation on Lebanese civilians and infrastructure at times led to anger against Hizballah from the Lebanese society, but in some instances, like the Israeli bombing of a UN bunker where civilians had taken refuge in Qana on April 18, 1996, killing 106 people increased the national support for Hizballah.

Israeli Unilateral Withdrawal of 2000, Hizballah and Syria

The Israeli unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000, a month and a half before the declared date, took many observers by surprise. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak made the withdrawal from Lebanon a part of his election campaign promise in 1999. Upon coming to power he declared that the withdrawal would take place in July 2000. At 3:00 am on May 24, 2000, the last Israeli soldier left the Lebanese soil from the Fatima border crossing. Hizballah was quick to declare the Israeli withdrawal as its own

⁵ Najem, "Lebanon and Europe: The Foreign Policy of a Penetrated State", p. 104.

⁶ William L. Cleveland, *The History of Modern Middle East*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1994, p. 445.

victory, its long years of determination and resistance (*mukawamah*) and banners writing ‘Thanks to Hizballah’ were placed all over south Lebanon. What would happen after the Israeli withdrawal has kept many observers busy and predictions that civil strife and sectarian violence would replace the order in the region were widely heard. However, Hizballah was significant in maintaining the order in the region and quickly filled the void of Israeli and SLA presence. Now that Israel had withdrawn, Hizballah’s weapons and presence in the south became more questionable as well. The organization by ‘inventing’ the Sheeba Farms issue continued to keep its weapons and justified its fight against the Israeli ‘presence’ in Lebanon.

Although UN declared that Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon was complete, Hizballah claims that the 15-square mile border region – the Shebaa Farms – remains under Israeli occupation. UN has declared that the Sheeba Farms area is not Lebanese territory but is a part of the Golan Heights, and therefore Syrian territory under Israeli occupation since 1967, Hizballah underlines that it is Lebanese land and Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon is not complete until Israel withdraws from there as well. Since the 2000 withdrawal, there seems to be an ‘unspoken agreement’ between Israel and Hizballah in the Sheeba Farms. Hizballah continues to attack the Israeli presence in the Sheeba farms with its rockets and in return Israel shells Hizballah outposts, both sides generally refraining from attacking the civilians.

On 7 October 2000, Hizballah abducted three Israeli soldiers that were patrolling the Sheeba Farms. Ten days after the abduction, an electronics specialist Elhan Tannenbaum, a retired colonel in Israeli reserves, was arrested in Lebanon by Hizballah, on a spying allegation. It was not before January 2004 that there was a deal between Israel and Hizballah, mediated through German diplomats. As a result of the negotiations, Israel agreed to release hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the businessman and the bodies of three Israeli soldiers. However, at the last minute, Israeli officials refused to hand over the last three Lebanese prisoners, including the longest-held detainee, Samir al-Qantar, who has been in jail for 27 years for killing three Israelis after infiltrating the border. The Hizballah leadership promised its supporters that they would open new negotiations to release the three remaining prisoners in the near future. Addressing a large Shi’ite gathering in February 2006, Hizballah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah declared: “We are working on making this year the year to free our brothers in Israeli

detention – Samir Qantar and his friends”,⁷ giving the signs of the July abductions.

The Israeli withdrawal in 2000 has not only led to the questioning of Hizballah’s weapons but also brought into question the Syrian presence in Lebanon. After the Israeli withdrawal, some political groups began to call for a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, a process to contribute to Lebanon’s ‘normalization’ and restoration of its sovereignty. Despite these calls, Syria continued its presence in the country and maintained close ties especially with Shi’a groups and Hizballah. After the US invasion of Iraq, US and Israel tried to limit the power of Iran and Syria in the Middle East at large and Syrian presence in Lebanon also came under scrutiny in this context. As a part of this strategy, the US administration has increased its pressure on Syria with the regime change discourse.⁸ The 2004 has been an important year within this context. On 11 May 2004, President Bush has approved the decision of the Senate that called for imposing sanctions on Syria. UN Security Council Resolution 1559 of September 2004, which called for the “disbanding and disarming of Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias, the extension of the control of the government of Lebanon over all its territory, the strict respect of the sovereignty, territorial integrity, unity and political independence of Lebanon and fair and free presidential elections according to the Lebanese constitutional rules without foreign interference and influence” can be considered within this context as well, pointing the Hizballah weapons and Syrian presence as the main obstacles to Lebanese sovereignty. The day after the announcement of 1559, the Lebanese Parliament with Syrian-backing extended President Lahoud’s term in office for another three years. This was read as a sign of Syrian unwillingness to comply with the 1559. The assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on 14 February 2005 brought the Lebanese politics yet to another juncture. The general idea that Syria had an important role, to say the least, in the Hariri assassination had placed the Syrian presence to the center of political debate in the country. It would not be wrong to say that politics began to be shaped mainly around the Syrian presence in Lebanon from this point onwards and different coalitions that were for and against the Syrian role in Lebanon became important actors of Lebanese politics.

⁷ Patrick Goodenough, “Hizballah wants Israel to Free Child-Killer”, www.cnsnews.com, July 18, 2006.

⁸ For details of the US policy towards Syria and the discussions in the US Senate see, Stephen Zunes, “U.S. Policy Towards Syria and the Triumph of Neoconservatism”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XI, No.1, (2004), pp. 52-69.

The groups that gathered in the Martyr's Square on 14 March to protest the Hariri assassination, later known as the 14 March Forces, brought together different groups that were against the Syrian presence in the country. It included essentially Saad Hariri's Future Bloc (Sunni), Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (Druze), the Lebanese Phalanges (Christian) and Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces (Christian). This group also aimed at keeping the status quo that was established after the Ta'if Accord and tried to prevent a strengthened role for the Shi'a and Hizballah in the politics of the country in general. Placed against the 14 March forces are the coalition known as 8 March group, mainly as a result of the demonstration that they held for 'thanking Syria for all that it has done for Lebanon'. The 8 March group is composed of the Shi'a forces of Hizballah and Amal, as well as the forces of General Aoun (a prominent Maronite) and smaller Sunni groups that support Syria. It is interesting to see General Aoun joining this pro-Syrian bloc as he was expelled from the country after Ta'if as a result of his anti-Syrian stance. This group supports Syrian role in the country and has also been calling for changing the status-quo in the country for a more powerful role for the Shi'a community at large.

Under pressure Syria withdrew its military and intelligence services from Lebanon on 27 April 2005. Although the Syrian withdrawal could be perceived as an important step in Lebanon's 'normalization' as a sovereign country, many observers underlined that this would not lead to stability in the country in the long-run, to the contrary order would be shattered. This was mainly put forward with the idea that the reasons that brought Syria into Lebanon in the first place – deep sectarian divisions and political deadlock – were not solved before it left. The May 2005 general elections were the first elections without a Syrian military presence in Lebanon after decades. Two main groups, the 14 March and the 8 March, competed in the election. The 14 March group won 72 seats, while the pro-Syrian coalition won 56 seats in Parliament.⁹ The Lebanese political system was deeply divided at the time Hizballah kidnapped the Israeli soldiers.

The July 2006 War

As mentioned above, on 12 July, Hizballah attacked Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) across the internationally recognized borders, killed three and captured two of its soldiers. It also sent mortar shells and Katyusha rockets on the IDF and civilians residing near the border "as a diversionary

⁹ For a detailed analysis of the elections and the emerging political debate see Meliha Altunışık, *Lübnan Krizi: Nedenleri ve Sonuçları* (Lebanese Crisis: Reasons and Consequences), İstanbul, Tesev Yayınları, 2007, pp.18-20.

tactic”.¹⁰ As different from the previous attacks and the kidnapping of 2000, Hizballah in this operation acted outside the Sheeba Farms area and broke the ‘unspoken agreement’. Soon after the kidnappings on 12 July, while Nasrallah announced that they were ready for a prisoners’ exchange, Israel launched a limited military operation to the region where its soldiers were kidnapped. When five of its soldiers were killed in this operation, on 13 July the Israeli government started a full-scale attack on Lebanon called as ‘Operation Change of Direction’. Although Hizballah was caught off guard by the ferocity of the Israeli response, in a short time they responded with an effective strategy that has surprised many observers. As the Israeli air attack continued to shell not only the Hizballah positions but also most of the infrastructure in Beirut and in southern Lebanon as well as those neighbourhoods entirely opposed to Hizballah, Hizballah shelled Israel and its forces by surface-to surface rockets, shore-to-ship missiles, anti-tank missiles and used unmanned planes.¹¹ As the war started Hizballah announced its aim as a limited one: survival in the war, which it achieved. What were, then, Israel’s aims, in launching this war and to what extent was it successful?

Although Israel’s initial aim in this war was the release of its kidnapped soldiers, soon this aim was taken over by the aim of destroying Hizballah or at least weakening its power militarily and politically. On 14 July, Israeli Defense Minister Amir Peretz said that they knew Hizballah would break the rules of the game and that they were determined to get rid of this organization.¹² Peretz, in another speech, said that Hizballah leader Nasrallah “is going to get it so bad that he will never forget the name Amir Peretz”, while Olmert was giving speeches that they would triumph in this war over Hizballah.¹³ By attacking the infrastructure of the country and targeting the Christian neighborhoods, as well as the Muslim ones, Israel aimed at alienating Hizballah in Lebanon, undermining its legitimacy and showing its responsibility in pushing Lebanon to such a war by capturing the soldiers.

¹⁰ Dov Waxman, “Between Victory and Defeat: Israel after the War with Hizballah”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.30, No.1 (2006-2007), p. 28.

¹¹ For a detailed military assessment and information about Hizballah’s military strategy during the war see, Andrew Exum, *Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment*, Policy Focus #63, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2006.

¹² CNN News, 14 July 2006.

¹³ Dov Waxman, “Between Victory and Defeat: Israel after the War with Hizballah”, p. 31

Another aim of Israel during the war has been to reestablish the credibility of Israeli military deterrence, not only against Hizbullah but throughout the region. After Ehud Barak's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and Ariel Sharon's disengagement from Gaza in 2005, Israel's deterrent capability was thought to be on the decline. By targeting the infrastructure and cutting off Lebanon from the outside world, Israel aimed at showing its overwhelming military might, sending a message to not only Hizbullah and the Palestinian groups but also a "broader regional message that proxy wars against Israel executed by Iran and Syria will no longer be tolerated".¹⁴

Initially, many people in Israel as well as in the US, perceived Hizbullah's operation as part of a larger plan and in connection with the abduction of a soldier in Gaza a few weeks ago. According to this idea, the kidnapping of the soldiers, both by Hizbullah and Hamas, could be explained as a result of a collective planning of Iran and Syria. As the Israeli Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Tzipi Livni told, they were faced with a unified "axis of terror and hate created by Iran, Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas that wants to end any hope for peace".¹⁵ In a similar way, US President George W. Bush, by bringing in Iraq to this picture as well, said "What is very interesting about the violence in Lebanon, the violence in Iraq and the violence in Gaza is this: these are all groups of terrorists who are trying to stop the advance of democracy [...] and Israel has the right to defend herself".¹⁶ Therefore, Israel's response to the kidnapping was thought as a response not only to Lebanon and Hizbullah but also as a demonstration of force to Iran and Syria, both showing them the military capabilities of Israel and the US.

There were also arguments underlining that Israel, in collaboration with Washington, was already planning to attack Hizbullah in Lebanon and the kidnappings gave an important justification to Israel to do that. According to this line of argument, Washington was disappointed with the developments in Lebanon as it believed that after Syria's withdrawal, the power and role of Hizbullah would decline and the Lebanese Army would be able to disarm the organization. On the contrary, Hizbullah got

¹⁴ Helena Cobban, "The 33-Day War: Hizbullah's victory, Israel's choice", *Boston Review*, November/December 2006, <http://bostonreview.net/BR31.6/cobban.html>

¹⁵ Robert Blecher, "Converging upon War", *Middle East Report Online*, July 18, 2006, www.merip.org/mero/mero071806.html

¹⁶ The Guardian, "Israel Steps up Lebanon Offensive", July 13, 2006. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,1819295,00.html>

strengthened and even became a part of the government in the country. Therefore, the military option remained the only choice and “Israel needed only a suitable pretext, which the Hizballah’s cross-border operation on 12 July provided”.¹⁷

The UN Resolution 1701

The war lasted for 33 days and ended with the ceasefire on 14 August 2006, with the UN Resolution 1701. The UN Resolution 1701 was drafted by the United States and France and although being vaguely termed, it was considered to be more favorable to Israel than to Lebanon. The Resolution called for Hizballah to cease all attacks, release the kidnapped soldiers and allowed Israel to keep its troops in the south of Lebanon until the authority of the Lebanese Army and a strengthened UNIFIL of up to 15,000 troops were deployed to the area.¹⁸ The extension of the authority of the Lebanese Army to the south of the country that was so far under the de facto control of Hizballah and the organization’s demilitarization was an important aspect brought about by 1701 as it emphasized “the importance of the extension of the control of the government of Lebanon over all Lebanese Territory in accordance with the provision of the Resolution 1559 (2004) and 1680 (2006) and of the relevant provisions of the Ta’if Accords for it to exercise its full sovereignty so that there will be no weapons without the consent of the government of Lebanon and no authority other than that of the government of Lebanon”.¹⁹ Resolution 1701 was met with a surprising degree of consensus by Israel, Hizballah and the Lebanese government. Olmert supported the Resolution because it limited Hizballah’s activity through Lebanese Army’s deployment, reinforcement of UNIFIL and enhanced monitoring at the borders, with no parallel measures to limit Israeli military actions. Nasrallah, on the other hand, approved the enhanced UNIFIL “as long as it abides with its mission” which he defined as “supporting the Lebanese army, not to spy on Hizballah or disarm the resistance”.²⁰ Nasrallah said that Hizballah had more than 20,000 rockets and he pledged to abide with 1701 and to protect the land and citizens against Israeli violations, attacks and transgressions if the Lebanese state

¹⁷ Gilbert Achcar, “Lebanon: The 33-Day War and UNSC Resolution 1701”, Online Magazine: IV380 - July-August 2006, <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1101>

¹⁸ Dov Waxman, “Between Victory and Defeat: Israel after the War with Hizballah”, p. 33

¹⁹ UN Security Council, S/RES/1701 (2006), 11 August 2006

<http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/465/03/PDF/N0646503.pdf?OpenElement>

²⁰ Zvi Bar’el, “Nasrallah pulls no punches”, *Haaretz News*, June 12, 2007.

failed to do so.²¹ He said, “We are in favor of strengthening the army [...] once this is accomplished there will no longer be a need for the resistance. We are in favor of an army that would defend Lebanon and against a policy of strengthening the army and security services in order to counter the resistance”.²² Hizballah made an agreement with the Lebanese army that it will not take the Hizballah weapons as long as they are invisible. Lebanese government also underlined that the Resolution 1701 did not require it to look for Hizballah weapons, it would get them when it saw them. Therefore, as long as they remained hidden, there was no problem. On 17 August, the Lebanese army began to move to the south of the Litani River, arriving there for the first time after decades.

A War that Everyone Won?

Both sides to the conflict, Israel and Hizballah, made announcements following the war, underlining their victory and success. The Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was quick to underline the success and achievements of his country at the end of the war, although acknowledging the weaknesses as he said: “I say we had positive results in Lebanon, we had big achievements, we won this war and we were also exposed to some weaknesses, I think that eventually this will be the historical judgment, and I will get credit for that”.²³ Olmert argued that with Hizballah pushed back from Israel's northern border, hundreds of its fighters dead and its headquarters in south Beirut battered, Israel was largely successful in achieving its goals. However, not everyone agreed in Israel. The war has actually led to a drastic decline in the support of the Olmert government. Olmert was criticized for not being able to prevent Hizballah's rocket attacks to Israel during the war. Northern Israel received a daily dose of 150-200 rockets a day, leading to the questions of the ability of Israel to provide security for its own citizens. Besides, for many in Israel there was the image of their country being defeated by a group of terrorists, without a regular army. Moshe Arens, the former defense and foreign affairs minister criticized the government as he said “[...] the Arab and Muslim world [...] believe that Israel was defeated by a few hundred Hizballah fighters, not by a big, strong army comparable to the Israeli Defense Forces”.²⁴ The

²¹ ICG Report No.59, p. 9.

²² Ibid.

²³ “PM insists Israel won war”, *Ynet News*, 30. 03. 2007, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340, L-3383258,00.html>

²⁴ Moshe Arens, “Consequences of the 2006 War for Israel”, *MERIA Report*, Vol: 11, No: 1 (Mar.,2007), p. 24.

resignation of the Israeli Chief of Staff Halutz in January 2007 has further strengthened the opposition in Israel leading to calls for the resignations of Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz.

Besides, Hizballah, rather than being marginalized in Lebanon, increased its popularity and support not only in this country but also in the region at large. The results of a survey carried out after the war in Lebanon reveal that “a plurality of Lebanese believe that Hizballah emerged as the biggest winner” while “only 15 percent believe that Israel won the war” while 40 percent of those surveyed told that they had a more positive attitude towards Hizballah after the war.²⁵ Not only in Lebanon but in the Arab world at large, Hizballah’s popularity increased as a result of the war. While there were articles showing Nasrallah as “the only true Arab leader” in the Arab press, in the demonstrations in Egypt celebrating the 50th year of the nationalization of the Suez Canal, Nasrallah’s picture was placed next to that of Nasser in the posters.²⁶ Israel could not fulfill its war aims fully: although the Lebanese Army extended its authority to the south of the country, it does not have the power to disarm Hizballah, and the organization has not been ‘wiped out’ of Lebanese politics. Besides, the Israeli government faces a challenge for the war time strategy and the ‘mismanagement’ of the attack.

After the War, Hizballah leader Nasrallah was also quick to declare his own victory. Considering that the aim of the organization was defined narrowly as survival during the war, they were successful in this limited aim. But whether this was a ‘victory’ was contested by many groups. Nasrallah underlined that it was a “strategic, historic, divine victory” in the Arab history. Considering that Hizballah declared its aim during the war as survival and resistance to Israeli military forces, they were successful. Nasrallah, in an attempt to boost his popularity, said on Hizballah TV after the war, “I remembered the youths, the women and children, and all those whose houses were destroyed, all those who sacrificed their lives for the victory. What is happening now proves it, and I want to address the true victors – the members of the opposition, the fallen, the wounded, the hostages and their families, and all involved in the sacrifice”.²⁷ Hizballah’s

²⁵ Shibley Telhami, “Lebanese Identity and Israeli Security in the Shadows of the 2006 War”, *Current History*, January 2007, p. 22.

²⁶ Morten Valbjorn and André Bank, “Signs of a New Arab Cold War – The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi’i Divide”, *Middle East Report*, No. 242 (Spring 2007), p. 7.

²⁷ Rocco Nahmias, “Nasrallah: Halutz’s resignation filled me with joy”, *Ynet News*, 19 January 2007, www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3354485,00.html.

'*Cihad al-Bina*' branches were quick to launch a re-building effort and got credit for the help they have delivered to the suffering civilians.

However, as mentioned above, not all political parties and groups believed in Hizballah's victory nor did they deliver their support. Whether Hizballah was to be blamed for the kidnappings, whether they have acted alone in the kidnapping or they have at least 'informed' the government about their action also became questionable in the domestic arena. The Lebanese Premier Fouad Siniora after an emergency Cabinet meeting said that "the government was not aware of and does not take responsibility for, nor endorses what happened on the international border".²⁸ Indeed, Siniora accused Hizballah of 'adventurism' for kidnapping the two Israeli soldiers and open a road for the July war. Siniora's concerns were shared by others, especially by the members of the 14 March coalition.

As expected, the consequences of the war became an important debate and an issue of controversy between the 14 March forces and the Hizballah in particular and 8 March forces in general. The 14 March Forces interpreted the result of the war as a defeat for Hizballah. They viewed Hizballah's decision to accept 1701 as a sign of its weakness. They underlined that Hizballah accepted the resolution out of weakness – because it had great loss during the war. Accordingly, its financial resources have depleted, its popularity even among the Shi'i community has declined as it could not solve their political and economic problems, differences of opinion has emerged among the clergy and its military capabilities have declined greatly. Besides, they joined those that see Hizballah's actions as dictated by Iran and Syria. Saad Hariri put their arguments as follows: "What we are witnessing today is the execution of an Iranian and Syrian plan of which Hizballah is merely an instrument. Their aim is to prevent any forward move in Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq and to compel the US to negotiate from a point of weakness".²⁹ However for Hizballah, the picture is much different. Accordingly, the war has proved the success of Hizballah's resistance strategy. They have named the 14 March forces that were criticising the Hizballah's policies, as traitors and even as the 'collaborators of Israel'.

²⁸ Nafez Qawas Raed el Rafei, "Siniora's Cabinet makes clear it had nothing to do with what happened", *Daily Star*, July 13, 2006.

²⁹ International Crisis Group, *Policy Briefing*, No. 20, 21 December 2006, p. 5.

In sum, it is possible to argue that Hizballah increased its popularity in Lebanon and in the region at large. Despite opposition to their activities from the 14 March forces, they tried to increase the pressure on the government for a series of political reforms. In the meanwhile the attempts of the 14 March forces to set up an international tribunal for the Hariri assassination further strained the relations between the two coalitions and led to a political deadlock in the country. The resignation of six ministers from the government further exacerbated the tension. The calls of Hizballah and the 8 March group for elections in the country has been interpreted as an attempt of a coup by the Siniora government, mediation efforts were not successful and as the calls of Hizballah for continuous sit-ins and rallies in the streets of Beirut found support, Lebanese politics was further stuck. There were talks about a possibility of a civil war erupting once again in the country during this process as well as the talks that the Israeli-Hizballah war will repeat in a short period.

Looking at the regional dynamics, the War increased the debate on the deepening sectarian divisions within the Middle East. According to this line of thought, the War underlined the Sunni-Shi'a division in the region, that was already at work as a result of the Iraq war and will constitute the core of the future conflicts in the region.³⁰ In the new equation, the Shi'a groups in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon (mainly Hizballah) were pitted against a Sunni Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Some authors have asked the question whether Middle East was going through a new Arab Cold War, making references to Malcolm Kerr's terminology in analyzing the region's politics during 1950s and 1960s.³¹ However, a careful analysis reveals that the picture is much more complicated than a simple Sunni-Shi'a divide both in Lebanon, even when simply looking at the coalitions, and in the region at large, seen with the support the war and Nasrallah got among the Sunni in the Arab world.

³⁰ See for example, Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts in Islam will Shape the Future*. New York, W. Norton, 2006.

³¹ Valbjorn and Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War -The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide", p. 7.