

Escalation in the Middle East: a lasting damage to peace and democracy

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[This contribution reflects my personal view only, and should not be ascribed to Pugwash]

1. The rapid and dangerous escalation of war operations in the Middle East has resulted in a very significant loss of life among Lebanese, Palestinians and Israelis, and serious damage to civilian infrastructures. Major operations began with a low-level conflict around Gaza, that involved the launching of some missiles into Israel, some (more deadly) Israeli retaliation on Gaza, and the attack on an Israeli military post outside Gaza to which Israel reacted swiftly and very strongly. In the chain reaction that followed, admittedly Israel's intention was, and is, to inflict on the other side a far heavier punishment than that taken by Israel—which may appear as a militarily sound posture aimed at avoiding incidents and attacks, but, in fact, it is the civilian population that has been mainly affected. As a result, the suffering of the Lebanese and Palestinian civilian populations (in terms of deaths, wounded and destroyed infrastructures) has to date been largely disproportionate to that of Israel. When, in the case of Palestine, this discrimination already follows about 40 years of discrimination in the same direction, hostility and adversarial relations are bound to increase. So while Israel's heavy deterrence through punishment may work temporarily and occasionally in preventing or reducing attacks, the general sentiment of hostility in the region is increased, and creates in the long range a bigger obstacle to peace.
2. In the present war, the Palestinian Government itself has been directly attacked, and neither the Palestinian Government and Authority nor the Lebanese Government has been able to protect their own citizens, succumbing to Israeli military superiority and receiving no help from outside the region. But it is precisely the Palestinian Authority and the Lebanese Government which, in the minds of many (inside and outside the region), could help in "normalizing" the situation and making progress in the direction of peace. But how can they obtain the necessary credibility to operate in the future, on a path which will be largely uphill? Think about the Lebanese Government in particular. While the new Prime Minister has been hailed by the US and other Western countries as a symbol of the post-Syrian era, paradoxically during the "Syrian era" reconstruction was carried out and the economy rebooted. Now that the Syrians are gone, the country has been attacked, destroyed, Hezbollah is acting independently, and hundreds thousands of people (including Western and foreign Arab residents and tourists) have fled or are fleeing the country—most of them, ironically, having to go to Syria to save their lives and what property they can carry with them. Lebanon will have to restart from where it was 20 years ago, as the Israeli government put it. But since apparently no other country intends to (re-)occupy—at least permanently—Lebanon, then someone must hold the unrealistic belief that following this hard blow, and after pushing Lebanon back by 20 years, the same Lebanese Government will be stronger, will move to a quick reconstruction, will impose its will on Hezbollah, and will contribute constructively to peace in the region.
3. There has been much discussion about bringing democracy to the Middle East if not the Greater Middle East. Well, something happened. Iraq elected its own constitution and representative institutions and yet, three-and-a-half years after the invasion, is still crippled

by security problems and sectarian fighting, if not civil war. An international group of observers, including former US President Jimmy Carter, monitored what was called a very fair election in Palestine. Hamas won, unexpectedly--but this after all is democracy—and yet following its election, found that nobody gave it any sort of legitimacy. The new Government found itself under a multiple barrage, with the result that neither the Government nor the Parliament ever had the possibility to meet in person (but only via teleconference). The government did not have access to its own money—and I am referring not only to the money from sales taxes (which according to bilateral agreements with Israel belong to Palestine), but also to any (donated) money which the Palestinian Government was not allowed to bring into the territory. The US and the European Union cut their funding. The result is that the Palestinian elections have been nullified. We mentioned democratic development in Lebanon and where it is all ending up. Not surprisingly, any talk about bringing democracy to the greater Middle East has faded away. The concept of democratic development in the Middle East was killed by the contribution of those very leaders who promoted it.

4. In order to better understand the origin of the present crisis, it is useful to go back to the establishment of the new Hamas Government in Palestine. The failure to recognize its legitimacy and to engage it was one of the first serious miscalculations which led to the current crisis. The attitude of the Israeli Government, the US and the European Union was a simple corollary of the "do not talk to terrorists" principle. And Arab Governments, being so concerned about the increasing role of the Muslim Brotherhood in their own countries, were not ready to effectively defend the Hamas Government, which was boycotted, with the underlying assumption (again very unrealistic) that Hamas' failure under pressure would bring about the beginning of a regime change in Palestine. This was a corollary of yet another flawed theory, that of "regime changes induced by sanctions, imposed hardships and a communications block with the external world". Instead of giving the Hamas Government a chance and engaging them in a discussion of fundamental issues, the Western world and Israel chose to put the Hamas leadership in a corner. And a cornered group will try to get out of the corner in any way it can, which in this case involved the reprisal of some hostilities, an attempt to provoke a reaction and move out of the stalemate by creating instability. A wrong choice we might say, but cornered groups and people do not necessarily act rationally, especially if they do not see ways out.

It is most likely that after their unexpected victory, for which Hamas itself was not properly prepared, their primary goal was to work more efficiently than the previous Government, to curb corruption, to make progress for the Palestinians, and also to show a stronger attitude toward Israel, since Hamas' belief was that the Fatah Government had been too acquiescent, while at the same time greedy and inconclusive in improving the living conditions of Palestinians. In short, the new Hamas Government wanted to function better than the old Government, like any newly elected Government. In several discussions with the Hamas leadership we verified that the Hamas leadership shared the following points vis a vis relations with Israel:

- A. Long-term truce (hudna)
- B. Respect of bilateral Israeli-Palestinian agreements in so far as both parties (including Israel) respect them
- C. Acceptance in principle (but with some points to clarify) of the Beirut Arab (Saudi) Plan of 2002 promising full recognition of and peace with Israel in exchange for a return to the 1967 boundaries

These conversations with Hamas took place before the Prisoners' document and the proposal to hold a referendum on it. However, the feeling in Hamas and elsewhere was that any declaration or public statement taken by Hamas would have no effect on Israeli, US, EU or even Arab attitudes towards Hamas. I recently asked a Hamas Government minister whether the adoption of the Prisoners' document would change anything vis a vis the Israelis, and he responded that this was the same question asked to President M. Abbas, who answered more or less "we do not know". In other words, the alternatives for the Hamas Government were between "certain sticks" and "most likely sticks", carrots were nowhere to be found.

No dialogue with Hamas (and the new Palestinian leadership) was attempted on any official level. With the exception of a sporadic Russian initiative and, of course, Syria and Iran, no foreign government or institutions wanted to engage them in talk. We, as Pugwash, encountered many difficulties in trying to organize even an unofficial meeting between Hamas, Europeans, Americans and Israelis—for many reasons ranging from outright boycott (no countries offered to host such a meeting), to difficulties in the logistics of bringing people in and out Palestine, and hesitance on the part of many, including Hamas representatives, who are not accustomed to such dialogue. As we all too well know, the alternative to dialogue is free-ranging hostility and war, which is what we have now. Israeli military pressure on Gaza was answered by reactions in Gaza and by the intervention of Hezbollah from Lebanon. The Hezbollah attacks on Israel which in Israel's opinion were unprovoked, were for Hezbollah and many Palestinians provoked by the military occupation of Gaza. One might consider the Hezbollah intervention an irresponsible provocation, but they most likely considered it as an act of due solidarity.

5. Another consequence of the current crisis which should not be underestimated is the perception that being weak militarily brings a country close to mortal risks. In the Middle East, militarily weak Iraq was attacked, occupied and brought from one nightmare (Saddam's regime) to another (near civil war). Lebanon—which tried to free itself from Syrian occupation and experienced a very difficult transition towards independence, with a very delicate balance between its components—with an inexistent military structure, is being smashed to pieces. To warrant the destruction of Lebanon, the killing of fewer than 20 Israelis (military & civilian) caused by one group (Hezbollah) inside Lebanon was sufficient. Israel, the nuclear-armed regional superpower, can do whatever it wants, with no serious containment. It is obvious that between the Lebanese and the Israeli model, any country would prefer to follow the latter. Any talk about disarmament is more difficult now. For instance, why should a country be interested in a WMD-free Middle East? To end up smashed by the countries that do have WMDs? The alternative surely would not have been for Israel to suffer passively a missile attack, but to respond in a proportionate manner and, above all, to be available to efforts that could prevent such attacks: the intense pressure put on Palestinians in the south (Gaza) not surprisingly created some reactions in the north (Hezbollah). There are people and groups which do not believe that pounding Palestinians should be left only to the discretionary judgment of Israel. There was a time in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when the moderating voice of Europeans, the Quartet, etc. had some role. When this moderating role totally disappeared, the Hezbollah rockets entered into action. Is this a surprising development? Again, we want to avoid misunderstandings which can abound in any discussion of such an emotionally charged issue like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We do not want to justify any form of violence. What we need to do here is to understand how this sequence of events developed in order to hopefully make some small steps towards peace in the future. So let us repeat some trivial points: armed actions often have a tendency to spiral out of control,

and lacking restraints, the number of people involved in hostilities often tends to increase; and, in the end, disallowing any reason or denying dignity to the enemy invariably worsens the situation. If the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is viewed as a conflict involving terrorist organizations attacking a democratic state or as a conflict between freedom fighters oppressed by an illegitimate tumorous entity implanted in Palestine, then we can be sure that peace will be a long time in coming.

6. What distinguishes the 2006 war so far has been the dramatic lack of any moderating influence from outside powers, and particularly from Western countries. Israel received *carte blanche* from the US, and the EU decided to remain mostly at the margin of the conflict. The so-called moderate Arab countries have used "moderate" tones, even when one of them, Lebanon, is being smashed to pieces. No one—in the West, in Russia, in the Arab establishments—has any particular sympathy for the Islamic movements (Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah, etc.), and the 2006 war has been seen as an “opportunity” to get rid of them. Collateral damages are seen as “unpleasant” but somehow inevitable. The detachment of some Arab Governments from the war situation in Lebanon and its consequences risks facing public opinion in their countries, thus creating internal problems. There is an illusion here—namely, that Islamic movements will see their role diminished on a global scale. But the opposite is more likely to happen. The Islamic movements will be seen as representing those who dared to resist (and inflict damage on) Israel and powerful Western pressures, and who will benefit from Muslim solidarity by attracting the defiant and disaffected of the Muslim world. Ultimately, the war on terrorism (allow me for a moment to use this abused and unrealistic terminology) will receive a setback when the number of people ready to launch terrorist attacks or simply be more sympathetic to their causes increases. Even in the Western world, sympathy for the Lebanon war of 2006 is and will be very limited. People will compare the number of people killed in Lebanon and the level of destruction inflicted on that country with the objective damage inflicted on Israel, and will draw their own conclusions. The rescue of some foreign residents or tourists in Lebanon was slow, and they will take notice that their own countries openly decided to not even push for a ceasefire, allowing their properties, not to mention the lives of their friends and relatives, to be destroyed.
7. To prevent bloodshed, a call for a ceasefire should be addressed to all combatants. The argument that Hezbollah is a *de-facto* combatant, but does not deserve such a qualification where talks, mediation and, Geneva Conventions are concerned, is unacceptable. This argument is only consistent with the conclusion that the total annihilation of Hezbollah is a prerequisite for peace. But the destruction of Lebanon proceeds much faster than the annihilation of Hezbollah. And Hezbollah is not a small secret organization, but a large political party representing a consistent part of the Lebanese population. And, if Syria and Iran are behind Hezbollah and supplied them with weapons and resources, then chances are that those countries may very well become involved in the conflict, with the escalation reaching catastrophic proportions. If this does not happen now, it could happen later, since the argument can be made that getting rid of Hezbollah will not be a reality if the countries backing them are allowed to continue to do so. The international community should take a more fair and realistic approach, calling for an immediate cease-fire and dialogue and communications with all involved parties. Reconstruction should follow. The presence of an international peacekeeping force should be considered—and the south of Lebanon could host such a force. And a more long-term consideration should be added: if a peacekeeping force is possible in Lebanon, then why not consider Gaza and the West Bank itself as hosting an international peacekeeping force? It would be ultimately in the interest of Israel to give up its role as the occupying force in the Palestinian territories. There are of course

many problems with this idea, but the two states solution will never take off while one of the two states has total control over the territory of the other. After so many years of failure, different ideas should be considered. The Palestinians should be allowed to choose their own government, and change it on the basis of its performance vis a vis the Palestinian people's well-being, and not as a consequence of other countries' vetoes or boycott. An international peacekeeping force could help in ensuring that no military action against Israel will be initiated. This may sound unrealistic at this moment, but I would say "think twice". Ultimately, we should abandon past conventional wisdom and try to think outside the box in the search for a more stable solution. Otherwise, even a cease fire will be an intermission before the next crisis.

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