

MIDEAST v2.0

Kevin Steel - Monday, 14 August 2006

If anyone understands the reality of what's happening on Israel's northern border, it's Avi Shachar. The 43-year-old Torontonian spent 17 years with Israeli military intelligence, most of that time posted in the north. For five years, Shachar was stationed in Lebanon itself, as part of Israel's occupation force there. Israel vacated the region in 2000, after 18 years of relentless and demoralizing assaults from Hezbollah, and just a few weeks ago, as the outbreak of full-scale hostilities began, Shachar watched intelligence video footage of what the pullout had created: an armed state within a state. "One of the things I was amazed at when I was in Israel was to see footage of some of these Hezbollah bunkers and outposts just feet away from the Israeli border, out in the open with the Hezbollah flag," he says. "In the bunkers they had surveillance equipment, listening devices." Shachar, who immigrated to Toronto in the late nineties after marrying a Canadian and now runs his own software company, says it was obvious to all that Hezbollah wasn't just sitting in its bunkers playing pinochle. "They were building tunnels, booby traps. So every Israeli incursion into that region now will result in a lot of casualties."

And yet, an Israeli incursion, a reclamation of south Lebanon, is exactly what the Jewish state has been forced to do. Bold and bloody Hezbollah attacks--missiles, packed with deadly shrapnel, fired down on Israeli civilian targets, and border raids to murder and kidnap Israeli soldiers--and the unwillingness, or more likely inability, of Lebanon to control its southern territory, appear to have left the Knesset only two options: allow Hezbollah to attack Israeli civilians and soldiers at its leisure, or respond with a show of force capable of ending Hezbollah aggression today, and in the foreseeable future.

Indeed, while Israel did not invite this conflict, the country may have before it a unique opportunity not only to deal a decisive blow to Hezbollah, but also to affect the region more broadly. The country, for one, is united in a way that it's never been before in its determination to crush terror--both Hezbollah in the north, and Hamas in the south, which had conducted its own cross-border attack, kidnapping and killing Israeli soldiers just days before the Lebanese incident. After decades of internal bickering over whether the Israeli Defense Forces' occupation of Gaza and Lebanon was helping or hindering peace, the IDF's retreat from both spots has made it obvious to virtually every Israeli that terrorists on their borders cannot be appeased. The fact that the country is now governed by Kadima, a coalition between Labor party doves and Likud party hawks, stands as proof that Israelis are of one mind when it comes to dealing with external threats.

Internationally, too, Israel is arguably enjoying more tacit support for its struggle than it has in generations. While the UN, Britain and France remain as hostile as ever to Israel's campaign against terror, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has dropped Ottawa's

historic tendency toward moral equivalence, publicly supporting Israel's right to self-defence. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and U.S. President George W. Bush have both made it clear, even as they mouth the predictable calls for "restraint," that they perceive Hezbollah, and its patrons in Iran and Syria, as the aggressors in this conflict. Bush has subsequently rejected calls for a ceasefire, while rushing an order of precision missiles, including "bunker buster" bombs, to Israel. Even Russia endorsed a press release emanating from the July G8 summit in St. Petersburg asserting that the "extremist forces" of Hezbollah and Hamas, and their sponsors, were risking "plung[ing] the Middle East into chaos." Even the Arab world has responded with surprising sympathy toward Israel--or at least ambivalence toward Hezbollah. On July 15, Ahmed Al-Jarallah, editor-in-chief of the Arab Times, wrote: "The operations of Israel in Gaza and Lebanon are in the interest of people of Arab countries and the international community." Two days later, Saudi Arabia led the Arab League in a surprise condemnation of Hezbollah's aggression. Rumours in the intelligence community suggest that the silence of Sunni Arab governments--Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, the U.A.E. and the Saudis--toward this conflict amounts to quiet support for Israel's quest to crush Hezbollah, and trepidation about Iran's militaristic ambitions. "They've pulled the plug, if you will, on Hezbollah," Fouad Ajami, Johns Hopkins University's director of Middle East studies, told Fox News. "They fear a regionally dominant Iran."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has made it abundantly clear that "under no circumstances" will Israel allow Iran to become a nuclear-powered threat in the region. With Israeli intelligence apparently convinced that Iran's first nuclear weapon may be completed within years, if not months, and the UN Security Council seemingly unprepared to stop Tehran's uranium enrichment program (thanks largely to the refusal of Russia and China to endorse sanctions), the best time for Israel to alter the Mideast's potentially terrifying future may very well be now.

The belief that Iran is behind Hezbollah's attacks against Israel, with Syria's assistance, is virtually unchallenged worldwide--with many assuming that the gambit is Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's way of redirecting international pressure that has been building against his nuclear weapons development through distraction. Shachar says it is widely known that the sophisticated missiles being fired at Israel have come from Iran through the Damascus airport and then by convoy, escorted by the Syrian army, down the Damascus to Beirut highway. On top of that, the Iranians have been supplying instructors and consultants to Hezbollah for years now, Shachar maintains. "Some of the arms that Hezbollah is operating are operated directly by Hezbollah personnel, but some of it, the more advanced equipment, is either operated by Iranians or in conjunction with Hezbollah," he says.

But will Israel exploit this moment of unity and international acquiescence to deal a mighty blow not simply to the terrorists of Hamas and Hezbollah, but more meaningfully, to their backers in Iran and Syria? Shachar says he doesn't think so. Israel's "population is sick and tired of this," he says. "Although the last few days when I was in Israel I saw the population taking this very courageously, in a while the people will get tired of being in

shelters. It's all a matter of time now. I don't think Israel wants to escalate this into a total regional war, not with Syria, not with Iran. I am certain of that," Shachar adds.

That's the official line, too. Avi Pazner, Israel's former ambassador to France, now a government spokesman, insists that Israel's objectives are limited. "The goals are to free the soldiers who were abducted in Israel, to push Hezbollah back from our borders, and to have the Lebanese army apply the UN resolution 1559, which states that the Lebanese army should be deployed over all the sovereign territory of Lebanon," Pazner says.

But Israel knows, or will at least soon learn, that its project is not so simple, says Mey Wurmser, director of the Center for Middle East Policy at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C. If Israel does not deliver a wider-ranging solution, Wurmser believes that within two years Hezbollah will end up fully rearmed by its allies in Damascus and Tehran, and Israel will find itself dealing with the same problems all over again. She believes Israel is making a big mistake by not taking the fight to Syria, but rather, attacking and weakening Lebanon, whose government remains weak just 15 months after the Cedar Revolution forced out a Syrian puppet regime. "You have a problem with Syria, deal with Syria," Wurmser says. "Don't destabilize a friendly government." She believes that Israel may be making it easier for Syria to move back into Lebanon.

Dealing directly with Syria would almost certainly have an impact on the growing Iranian problem as Iran's mullahs have come to rely on Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad to entrench their power in the region. Last year, the two tyrannies signed a formal military alliance. Assad, having proven an inept leader after assuming power following the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, the so-called "Lion of Damascus," in 2000 (primarily by losing control of economically vital Lebanon after arranging for the sloppy assassination of popular Lebanese reformer and former prime minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005), reportedly perceives his association with Iran as necessary to his political survival.

Ahmadinejad, meanwhile, apparently perceives Syria as a necessary ally in securing support for Iran's Islamic extremism throughout the Mideast. The Ayatollah Khomeini had dreamed of exporting his Islamic revolution, but Tehran's brand of Shiite radicalism is less popular amongst Arabs than the Sunni variety espoused by Osama bin Laden. "There is a fight over who is the ultimate nutball," Wurmser says of the tensions between the two extremist sects. That Iran is not an Arab nation (it's Persian), and that the majority of Muslims worldwide are Sunni, likely has Ahmadinejad concluding that an alliance with primarily Sunni Arab Syria is necessary to broaden his influence.

Syria not only harbours commanders from virtually every Islamic terrorist organization in the Middle East (including the heads of Hezbollah and Hamas), but it's a mere 100 miles from the Israeli border. An attack would be extremely feasible; following the Hamas raid on Israel in late June, Israeli warplanes even buzzed one of Assad's palaces, reminding him and his terrorist guests of the country's ultimate vulnerability. With a direct attack on Syria's army, eliminating the few hundred tanks that Assad needs to prop up his unpopular dictatorship, Israel could change the political complexion of the Middle East, and likely for the better. In addition to crippling the hostile and belligerent Assad regime,

Israel would not only weaken Iran's expansion of power, but it would send a powerful message: Jerusalem will not hesitate to smash its enemies to save itself. What it almost certainly won't do, however, is deter Ahmadinejad from proceeding with his plan to develop nuclear weapons.

For years, intelligence analysts have speculated about how Israel will eventually decide to deal with an unstoppable threat of nuclear-armed Iran, given that Ahmadinejad has made it clear that his fondest wish is for Israel to be "wiped off the map." The only question in some analysts' minds is when the leader--who is said to believe that a mighty war in the Middle East is necessary to fulfil a Shiite prophecy about the second coming of the 12th imam, one of Mohammed's descend-ants--will make good on his pledge. It may be sooner, says Wurmser, than we think. Iran recently announced that it will not respond until Aug. 22 to the latest incentive packages offered by western nations to discourage its nuclear program--a date that some have noted ominously corresponds to Lailat-al-Miraj on the Islamic calendar. That's the day when Mohammed, according to legend, took a night flight, guided by the angel Gabriel, from Mecca to Jerusalem, where he ascended to heaven. "So you've got something flying through the air to Jerusalem on Aug. 22. OK?" Wurmser says, leaving the conclusion up to the imagination.

Everyone recalls Operation Opera, the audacious 1981 raid by six Israeli F-16s on Iraq's Osirak reactor that ended Saddam Hussein's plans for a nuclear program in a matter of minutes. But Iran is further away--it's more than 1,000 miles from Jerusalem to Tehran--and its nuclear installations have wisely been scattered throughout the country, often buried deep in subterranean bunkers. If Israel chooses, or is forced, to deal with Iran directly, it will be an even more complicated and riskier affair than it faced with Iraq.

That's why Jed Babbin, who served as U.S. deputy undersecretary of defense in the George H. W. Bush administration, and is now a contributing editor at *The American Spectator*, says it's the U.S. that should expand this localized war into Iran--and soon. Not because it would serve Israel's interests (though it surely would), but because it's necessary, too, for short- and long-term U.S. interests in the Middle East. "We can be in Iraq for 60 more days or 60 more years and Iraq will never be safe or stable or secure unless we deal with both Syria and Iran," Babbin says.

A ground invasion is out of the question, Babbin admits. But he rejects those who interpret the current Mideast conflict as a minor skirmish with terrorists. He says there's "a much deeper and darker thing going on." Babbin believes, "the Ahmadinejad regime is trying to increase tensions, increase hostilities and perhaps goad America into some sort of limited strike against his regime or against his nuclear weapons program with the intention of demonstrating to the world that he can survive what we throw. If we do something with Iran, we have to do something that is decisive. And I would advocate that we do so forthwith," Babbin says.

At the very least, the current conflict seems to have isolated Iran more than it was already. Tehran has managed to tick off even those western nations, such as Canada and Germany, that have a history of being soft on even the most problem-atic Islamic

regimes, ensuring that the global community will be more unsympathetic than ever to Iran's nuclear ambitions. Ahmadinejad has also at least partly reoriented the sympathies of the Arab world, galvanizing the Sunni regimes against Iran and its terrorist agents. Some, such as John Thompson, president of the Toronto-based Mackenzie Institute, a security policy think-tank, aren't sure how long it will last. "Even though the Iranian regime has the rest of the Muslim world worried, remember, when Muslims are being confronted by outsiders, even if it's Iranian Shiites raising a green banner and saying, 'Help us, o brothers!,' the Arab on the street is going to want to help," Thompson says. But for now, the enemies of Iran and Syria appear to have what may amount to a chance to change the deadly course of the Middle East by weakening Syria, partly taming Iran and, hopefully, freeing Lebanon from its terrorist parasites. It may literally prove to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

### **IT'S NO LONGER ABOUT LAND**

It seems almost universally agreed that the war between Israel and Hezbollah marks a new direction in the long-running Arab-Israeli conflict. It might not be "World War III" as a *Maclean's* cover story recently put it, but something has qualitatively changed. The conflict is not so slowly being transformed from a national to a religious conflict, from Arab-Israeli to Islamist-Israeli. Since 1948, Arab-Israeli wars were conflicts between pan-Arab nationalism and Zionism--conflicts over which nation and people would inhabit the land. By the 1970s, pan-Arabism gave way to Palestinian nationalism, in which the right of Palestinians to a state became the focal point of the conflict. The first intifada of the late 1980s was understood as a national uprising of the Palestinian people, protesting the occupation of their lands.

Something changed in 2000, the year Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak withdrew from Lebanon, and at Camp David offered Yasser Arafat a Palestinian state. Arafat launched the second intifada, characterized not by rock-throwing patriotic Palestinian boys, but Islamist suicide bombers. The transformation from Palestinian nationalism to Islamic jihad was underway.

Today, Israel finds itself in a war not against an Arab state, but the jihadism of Hamas and Hezbollah. Both enjoy the patronage of Iran, which is not an Arab state, but certainly is an Islamist one. The descent of the Palestinian cause from national movement to jihadism bodes very ill for the future of the region.

Nationalist uprisings, which customarily seek independence or autonomy, are inherently political projects and so are subject to the compromises and adjustments that politics demands. As circumstances change, political positions change, too. Indeed, the shape of Israeli nationalism has changed repeatedly and remarkably over the past few decades. Israeli hawks today would concede what Israeli doves, 30 years ago, would not.

The essentially religious character of the Hezbollah-Hamas opposition to Israel is much less open to change or moderation. If one believes that Islamic doctrine requires the

expulsion of infidels from any lands where Muslims once ruled, then the normal cut-and-thrust of politics offers little hope of success. Jihad becomes the more attractive option.

This is worrying on at least two counts. First, Israel is attempting to fight a religious war by using force to change the political calculus. Aside from strict security measures (destroying Hezbollah rockets, et cetera), Israel wants to deliver a devastating military-political blow to Hezbollah's sponsors. But if political considerations are secondary to religious ones, it's a project unlikely to succeed.

Second, an Islamist war is dire news for Jews, followed by Christians, but other Muslims above all. The attacks against Jews by jihadis are well known, but their terror also makes Arab Christians feel unwelcome in their own land. To the extent that Islamism dominates the Arab-Israeli conflict, the position of Christian Arabs will decline, both numerically and in terms of involvement in public life. But jihadism is even worse for Muslims than for Christians, as the tens of thousands of Iraqi Muslims killed by suicide bombers attest. And it is Muslims who even today in Lebanon unfortunately bear the brunt of Israel's anti-Hezbollah attacks.

Israel, with its superior might, is certain to win this military battle. But it is the jihadis who have been successful in changing the war.

*--Raymond J. de Souza*