

# Analytical Perspectives on the War in Lebanon

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The fault lines and events of the summer 2006 war in Lebanon can be perceived through – at least – five different frames of reference. While not mutually exclusive, these frames give different emphasis to individual aspects of the issue, and favour certain decisions and solutions over others. Each of these perspectives is sustained by a different theory of how the world works, and each can be identified by a central concept that informs its respective theory:

- the Global War on Terror
- Islamic fundamentalism vs modern Israel
- asymmetrical wars
- weak statehood
- power struggles in the Middle East.

In this brief article, each of these frameworks will be examined with regard to its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its policy implications. Finally, some options for political action will be proposed.

## Global War on Terror (GWOT)

US President George W. Bush and many of his fellow warriors have perceived the war in Lebanon to be a local manifestation of the Global War on Terror, fought by the United States and its allies. Friend and foe, good and evil are clearly distinguishable from each other according to this framework, which indeed only conceives of these two camps. Israel is fighting the same war in the Middle East that the United States is fighting on a global scale. The Lebanese Hezbollah and Jihadists of the al-Qaeda persuasion are collapsed into the same enemy category. According to this perspective, US national interest dictates support for Israel in its attempt to destroy Hezbollah.

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The main weakness of this framework is its inability to distinguish between global Jihadists on the one hand, and national groups such as Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas on the other. This, however, is a necessary distinction to make. The latter organisations possess a local agenda and a constituency that expects tangible services and benefits. It is possible to engage Hezbollah or Hamas in *Realpolitik* bargains. Forfeiting this option not only makes fighting global terror more difficult, it also hinders the search for stability and for viable solutions in the Middle East.

### Islamic fundamentalism vs modern Israel

A number of Israeli as well as European politicians have understood the war set off by Hezbollah as a confrontation between radical Islam and an Israeli state that represents modernity. According to their arguments, the war was not about gaining territory or self-determination, as was the case with previous conflicts. Instead, Hezbollah allied itself with the Palestinian Hamas (which denies Israel's right to exist), mobilised hatred of Israel on a regional scale and attempted to weaken the Jewish state. Occasionally, this line of argument will suggest that Israel represents a Western model of modernity in the Middle East, and that therefore the war in Lebanon carries elements of a clash of cultures between Islamic fundamentalism and Western civilisation.

This analysis may help explain why Sunni Islamists in Egypt carry flags of the Shia Hezbollah at demonstrations. However, it remains inappropriate for adequately grasping the situation. It disregards the fact that the Hamas-led government in the Palestinian territories was by no means happy about the way Hezbollah tried to instrumentalise the Palestinian agenda. Such an analysis also marginalises important fault lines in the conflict. The real dividing line in any cultural clash, if one is willing to consider it as such, does not run between "the West" and "Islam". Instead, the fault line is situated within the Arab-Muslim civilisation itself and divides those who want to integrate their countries and societies into a globalised world from those who seek to prevent this from happening. Hezbollah, too, knows that it is not in a position to threaten Israel's existence by firing rockets at it. The "Party of God" was apparently aiming for a limited confrontation, but actually started a war that, above all, threatened the experiment of an independent, multi-confessional and democratic state in Lebanon.

### Asymmetrical wars

Many observers have stressed the fact that the war in Lebanon, as an asymmetrical war fought between a highly armed nation-state and a guerrilla movement, holds many lessons for future wars of this type. Although tight, this frame of reference allows some inferences for the study of war and peace. For instance, it demonstrates the impossibility of vanquishing a guerrilla

movement by destroying civilian infrastructure. This perspective also shows that a guerrilla force can claim victory merely by holding out long enough against a state enemy with superior arms, and stresses the importance of a “war of images” in an age of media globalisation. As Lothar Rühl has pointed out in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*,<sup>1</sup> the asymmetrical-war analysis also shows that during this type of conflict guerrilla movements tend not to respect humanitarian international law – hardly anyone even expects them to do so. But they are not the only ones, state actors involved in such confrontations also tend to ignore the rules. Politically, this poses the question of the development of humanitarian international law and of the protection of human security in the context of non-traditional wars.

### **Weak states**

This analytical framework focuses on the risks inherent in a weakening of state institutions in the Arab world. After all, a non-state actor, Hezbollah, initiated a war single-handedly. The leaderships of a number of Arab states were challenged politically by the transnational support attracted by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. In the Middle East, non-state actors who fight wars are hardly a novelty. Usually, they struggle to achieve statehood, with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) being the most prominent example in this regard. This is different in the case of the most recent war in Lebanon: Hezbollah was not asking for its own state, it was represented as a party in the Lebanese parliament and had two ministers in the government. Nonetheless it presumed to independently initiate acts of war, and even to declare war on a neighbouring country. The result was a triangular confrontation in which Hezbollah fought Israel, Israel fought the state of Lebanon, and the latter was reduced to asking for international help to put an end to the fighting, demonstrating its inability to enforce decisions on the whole of its territory.

Focussing on Lebanon should not obscure, however, that other states in the region are also at risk. In the Palestinian territories, we are witnessing a process of state failure without a state, as it were. In Iraq, state authorities cannot even stand up to militias, criminal gangs and terror organisations in the nation’s capital. At the same time, sectarian tensions are mounting throughout the entire region, mainly between Sunni and Shia. Wherever state institutions have been undermined by corruption, bad governance and despotism, the appeal of ethno-nationalistic and confessional identities is on the rise, and is in turn further weakening the state. If external actors are interested in stabilising the region, they will have to consider ways in which institutions can be strengthened again, mainly in the Palestinian territories and in Lebanon. Only if citizens witness that state institutions can deliver basic public goods

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<sup>1</sup> L. Rühl, “Das Ende der schnellen Siege”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 August 2006.

such as security, welfare, reconstruction, and peace, will they align themselves with state policies rather than confessional or tribal communities and parties.

### **Power struggles in the Middle East**

Finally, the war in Lebanon can be interpreted as a further episode in a series of unresolved Arab-Israeli conflicts about power, territory, sovereignty and resources. In terms of International Relations theory, this is a realist perspective that focuses primarily on the interests of the states involved. Based on the assumption that states compete for security under conditions of anarchy, it illuminates why Israel reacted so disproportionately to a Hezbollah commando mission: out of concern for maintaining its own deterrence power. It also explains why an internationally isolated Syria, with few hopes of new peace negotiations that might enable it to win back the occupied Golan Heights, opted for ostentatious support of Hezbollah and celebrated the ceasefire as a victory for the “resistance” against Israel. For Syria, even the perception that it is using Hezbollah as a proxy in the fight against Israel is useful and may support its aim of forcing Israel into concessions – or negotiations – over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

This frame of analysis remains the most important one for international actors who seek viable diplomatic solutions in the Middle East. As crucial as the ceasefire dictated by the UN Security Council and an international peacekeeping force may be, they will not bring about long-term trade-offs and, by implication, long-term stability. These can only be attained if the tangible, legitimate interests of the states and quasi-states involved are taken into account and translated into a comprehensive agreement with gains and trade-offs for all sides. At the moment, the basic legitimate interests of the various parties (leaving aside the illegitimate ones, which would include the annihilation or domination of a neighbouring state) are not even irreconcilable. Somewhat simplified, they can be characterised as 3Ss+I: Israel’s security, Palestinian statehood, Lebanon’s sovereignty, and Syria’s territorial integrity.

Israel primarily demands security. This is defined as security for its citizens against rocket or suicide attacks carried out by non-state actors, but also, in the longer term, the attainment of peace agreements with the Arab states as well as Iran whom Israel now perceives as threatening its existence.

The Palestinians want a state of their own that exists alongside Israel and that is viable economically and in security terms. This means that the territory making up a future Palestinian state has to be contiguous and controlled by a single, central Palestinian authority, in turn calling for the dismantlement of certain Israeli settlements and the handing over of Israeli infrastructure in the West Bank. Agreements as to territorial division – blueprints and formulae

that outline how a two-state solution can be reached – exist with the 2000 Clinton proposals, the 2001 Taba *acquis*, and the 2003 Geneva Accord.

Lebanon wants to achieve and maintain its sovereignty both towards Israel and towards Syria. This involves a settlement of the Shebaa farm issue (which Syria and Lebanon claim is Lebanese while Israel which currently occupies it, claims it is Syrian), a border agreement between Israel and Lebanon, the demarcation of the Syrian-Lebanese borders, and an end to Syrian interference in Lebanon's domestic politics. The Lebanese Armed Forces must be sufficiently equipped to deal with the task of controlling all of Lebanon's territory.

Syria wants to regain the occupied Golan in order to reinstate its territorial integrity. Before US-brokered Israeli-Syrian negotiations faltered early in 2000, the two local parties had come relatively close to an agreement. While details remained unresolved, it was clear that the basic formula for a peace treaty would involve the return of the entire Syrian territory that Israel had occupied in 1967 in exchange for a "full" peace that would involve security agreements as well as political and economic relations.

The most important actors within the international community would be well-served in seeking to reopen negotiations between Israel and the three neighbours with which it has not yet signed peace treaties, that is, the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon and Syria. This should take place by way of a conference modelled on the 1991 Madrid meetings, and it would help each party realise their legitimate interests. An important lesson to come out of the negotiations and agreements of the 1990s, including the Oslo Accords, is that any meaningful peace initiative must be clearly goal-oriented. While process is important, and benchmarks and timetables must be agreed upon and binding, the eventual goal of the process has to be equally clear to all parties, and has to be attainable in the not so distant future. This calls for final rather than interim solutions.

A number of other frames of analysis can, of course, be imagined for the purpose of explaining events and developments in the Middle East. Particularly, actors in the region itself have some. Should the international community – especially the United States and the European Union – fail to work towards a comprehensive settlement of conflicts in the Middle East, those forces in the Arab-Muslim world that have a different interpretation of events would gain in strength: they would interpret events according to a theory of non-negotiable conflicts, in which Western imperialism can only be met by an Islamic resistance.