



After the war: the Middle East in recomposition

military-Earth thinking notebook

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The fighting in the summer of 2006 between the Israeli army and the Lebanese Hezbollah forces, with the rest of Lebanon's population and economic potential as collateral victims, constitutes one of the longest "Arab-Israeli wars" (35 days). They have involved in the foreground, albeit to different degrees, Israel, Lebanon in all its components, and the Palestinians in the Territories. But they obviously had regional consequences and led to a new form of involvement, not without ambiguity, of the main international players.

In this type of confrontation where, as some fine minds have said, "who does not win loses and who does not lose wins", and in the absence of an obvious winner, Israël, used to crushing its adversaries in a few days, appears unquestionably to be the author of a flagrant military counter-performance, which seems to be due:

- to Hezbollah's good preparation, underestimated by Israeli intelligence,
- to the hesitations of the Israeli leadership, capable of a rapid response but unable to exploit it in time through a large-scale ground operation,
- to a staff error: the exclusive choice of air strategy, inefficient and politically counterproductive.

In short, lack of foresight and leadership.

For Israel the consequences are mainly negative.

- Domestically, a crisis of confidence in society in the face of the fragility of its political and military elites,
- At the regional level, the policy of "unilateral disengagement", which seemed to be fairly generally accepted after the successful withdrawal from Gaza, has probably been definitively abandoned. It has been proven that the 'security fence' does not provide any face to the Katyushas, or even to the missiles. It will

therefore be necessary to resume dialogue, first of all with the Palestinians, under the worst possible conditions, while suspending any withdrawal from the West Bank,

- On the international scene, the Israeli attitude, especially towards Lebanon, has rekindled tensions between Europeans (for whom Israel is increasingly becoming the main cause of instability in the Middle East) and Americans (for whom it remains the first line of defence against Islamo-fascism). The tactical rapprochement between Paris and Washington on the Lebanese-Syrian dossier seems to have come to an end,
- finally, more generally, the Muslim world is united in its hatred and rejection of Israel, and even of the West as a whole: we are closer than ever to the clash of civilizations.

In Lebanon, where there was total surprise in the face of Israel's widespread air offensive, the Prime Minister succeeded in establishing a certain authority over political forces that are divided not only by the well-known confessional cleavages but also by the more recent division between the "March 14 forces" [1] and the pro-Syrian camp. However, the narrowness of his room for manoeuvre compels him to use double language which is extremely dangerous (particularly with regard to the disarmament of Hezbollah) and therefore poses a serious threat to the durability of the truce.

The Arab countries are once again helpless spectators. The Arab League is divided but Syria is not isolated. Most of the countries fear that Hezbollah will take on excessive importance but :

- governments, including in the Sunni area, are deeply out of step with public opinion and must avoid lending a flank to extremists,
- The regional media, by broadcasting very harsh images of the conflict and its consequences on the populations (in Lebanon but also in Gaza) have made any moderate stance practically impossible,
- Nasrallah, although driven by the "Arab street", spoke relatively "reasonably", especially to the Lebanese government,
- Similarly, Syria has taken care to appear as a key and responsible player, in particular by not closing its border and thus welcoming a considerable number of refugees.

Finally, Iran has found in this crisis an ideal opportunity to advance its pawns along the three axes of its foreign policy:

- the nuclear dossier,
- the assertion of a regional power stature,
- and in parallel, that of a spiritual and ideological leader of the Muslim world, beyond the division of Shiism.

At the outbreak of hostilities, the three main actors, Israeli, Lebanese and Palestinian, had just gone through a phase of political experimentation, which in each case led to an impasse.

- In Lebanon, after the upheavals of 14 March, Resolution 1559 and the Syrian "withdrawal", the old confessional fault lines were once again predominant, while Hezbollah monopolised the rhetoric (and reality) of resistance,
- in the Palestinian Territories, at the end of a long process that was poorly controlled because it was subject to various external constraints, Hamas was in the process of fragmentation,

- Similarly in Israel, the last elections gave 60% of the votes to community parties that relied on the heirs of a changing "Sharonism" for foreign policy.

Thus, while remaining prudent with regard to any notion of determinism, and without being able to decide on the question of possible political or even operational coordination between Hezbollah and Hamas, all the conditions were met. The most determined elements of the two Islamist formations did not seek to strengthen their position by making Israel bend, militarily in the first case, politically (on the important issue of prisoners) in the second.

After the cessation of hostilities, the stakes seem very similar for the three protagonists: to reconstitute national unity, to heal the physical and economic wounds, and above all to choose the way forward (Cold War or negotiated peace) for the medium term. Given the trauma experienced by the various political forces, such goals require a renewal of coalitions and government teams, perhaps new elections. Indeed, in the immediate term, the logic of confrontation still prevails.

The implementation of the usual United Nations mechanisms, belatedly and in a piecemeal fashion, led to resolution 1701 and the deployment of the reinforced UNIFIL (UNIFIL II).

The short-term prospects are not bad: the resolution is being implemented, the force is being deployed and, exceptionally, China, which always tends to remain on the sidelines of international operations, is making a significant commitment.

But this should not hide the fact that in the region support for Resolution 1701 is only superficial almost everywhere, to the point that one must ask whether the purpose of UNIFIL II is not to give the combatants a breathing space before the resumption of hostilities?

Indeed, its mandate imposes on UNIFIL a "peacekeeping" posture, which implies the agreement of the belligerents, and also requires it to act in support of the Lebanese Army, which is notoriously incapable and, moreover, reluctant to carry out the missions set for it by 1701.

As for moving to a posture of peace enforcement, UNIFIL has neither the mandate, the means nor the political objectives that would require it to take sides (cf. Bosnia or Kosovo). Lastly, it suffers from the outset from a lack of credibility because the United States, rightly or wrongly perceived as the supreme arbiter by all the parties to the conflict, is not represented in it.

In the end, even if the situation is frozen in a precarious calm, it would be premature to think that the cessation of hostilities has been achieved. To date, the only argument for a prolonged truce, at least on the Lebanese front, is the need for the belligerents to rethink their strategy and rebuild their capabilities.

UNIFIL II may be as ineffective as UNIFIL I, with the added risk of terrorism. The question has not really arisen because for the major European countries the cost of non-intervention would have been politically prohibitive. But the feeling now prevails that it is ridiculous and unbearable to continue to pay for a peace that no one really wants?

Paradoxically, as after every Western intervention in the region since 1990, Iran is clearly comforted without having fired a shot. It has simply pointed out its capacity to influence, or even harm, any settlement that disregards its interests. As for the Western forces, they

are dispersing their resources and today find themselves in difficulty in three theatres... although the opening of a fourth cannot be ruled out, in the absence of serious negotiations between Israel and its neighbours or between the United States and Iran.

1) Coalition mainly articulated around the Sunnis of Saad Hariri, the Druze of Walid Jumblatt and the Christians of Samir Geagea.

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