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Lebanon: The 33-Day War and UNSC Resolution 1701

Von Gilbert Achcar | 16. August 2006

The resolution adopted by the UN Security Council on August 11, 2006 fully satisfies neither Israel nor Washington nor Hezbollah. This does not mean that it is "fair and balanced": it only means that it is a temporary expression of a military stalemate. Hezbollah could not inflict a major military defeat on Israel, a possibility that was always excluded by the utterly disproportionate balance of forces in the same way that it was impossible for the Vietnamese resistance to inflict a major military defeat on the U.S.; but neither could Israel inflict a major military defeat — or actually any defeat whatsoever — on Hezbollah. In this sense, Hezbollah is undoubtedly the real political victor and Israel the real loser in the 33-day war that erupted on July 12, and no speech by Ehud Olmert or George W. Bush can alter this obvious truth. [1]
In order to understand what is at stake, it is necessary to summarize the U.S.-backed goals that Israel was pursuing in its offensive. The central goal of the Israeli onslaught was, of course, to destroy Hezbollah. Israel sought to achieve this goal through the combination of three major means.
The first one consisted in dealing Hezbollah a fatal blow through an intensive "post-heroic," i.e. cowardly, bombing campaign exploiting Israel's "overwhelming and asymmetric advantage" in firepower. The campaign aimed at cutting Hezbollah's road of supplies, destroying much of its military infrastructure (stocks of rockets, rocket launchers, etc.), eliminating a major number of its fighters and decapitating it by assassinating Hassan Nasrallah and other key party leaders.
The second means pursued consisted in turning Hezbollah's mass base among Lebanese Shiites against the party, which Israel would designate as responsible for their tragedy through a frenzied PSYOP campaign. This required, of course, that Israel inflict a massive disaster on Lebanese Shiites by an extensive criminal bombing campaign that deliberately flattened whole villages and neighborhoods and killed hundreds and hundreds of civilians. This was not the first time that Israel had resorted to this kind of strategem — a standard war crime. When the PLO was active in southern Lebanon, in what was called "Fatahland" before the first Israeli invasion in 1978, Israel used to heavily pound the inhabited area all around the point from which a rocket was launched at its territory, even though rockets were fired from wastelands. The stratagem succeeded at that time in alienating from the PLO a significant part of the population of southern Lebanon, aided by the fact that reactionary leaders were still a major force down there and that the Palestinian guerillas could easily be repudiated as alien since their behavior was generally disastrous. This time, given the incomparably better status of Hezbollah among Lebanese Shiites, Israel thought that it could achieve the same effect simply by dramatically increasing the scope and brutality of the collective punishment.
The third means consisted in massively and gravely disrupting the life of the Lebanese population as a whole and holding it hostage through an air, sea and land blockade so as to incite this population, especially the communities other than Shiite, against Hezbollah, and thus create a political climate conducive to military action by the Lebanese army against the Shiite organization. This is why, at the onset of the offensive, Israeli officials stated that they did not want any force but the Lebanese army to deploy in southern Lebanon, rejecting specifically an international force and spitting on the existing UNIFIL. This project has actually been the goal of Washington and Paris ever since they worked together on producing UN Security Council resolution 1559 in September 2004 that called for the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and "the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias," i.e. Hezbollah and the organizations of the Palestinians in their refugee camps.
Washington had believed that, once Syrian forces were removed from Lebanon, the Lebanese army, which has been equipped and trained chiefly by the Pentagon, would be able to "disband and disarm" Hezbollah. The Syrian army effectively withdrew from Lebanon in April 2005, not because of the pressure from Washington and Paris, but due to the political turmoil and mass mobilization that resulted from the assassination, in February of that year, of Lebanese former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a very close friend of the Saudi ruling class. The balance of forces in the country, in light of the mass demonstrations and counter-demonstrations that occurred, did not make it possible for the U.S.-allied coalition to envisage a settlement of the Hezbollah issue by force. They were even obliged to wage the ensuing parliamentary elections in May in a broad coalition with Hezbollah, and rule the country thereafter through a coalition government including two Hezbollah ministers. This disappointing outcome prompted Washington to give Israel a green light for its military intervention. It needed only a suitable pretext, which the Hezbollah's cross-border operation on July 12 provided.
Measured against the central goal and the three means described above, the Israeli offensive was a total and blatant failure. Most obviously, Hezbollah was not destroyed — far from it. It has retained the bulk of both its political structure and its military force, indulging in the luxury of shelling northern Israel up to the very last moment before the ceasefire on the morning of August 14. It has not been cut off from its mass base; if anything, this mass base has been considerably extended, not only among Lebanese Shiites, but among all other Lebanese religious communities as well, not to mention the huge prestige that this war brought to Hezbollah, especially in the Arab region and the rest of the Muslim world. Last but not least, all this has led to a shift in the overall balance of forces in Lebanon in a direction that is the exact opposite of what Washington and Israel expected: Hezbollah emerged much stronger and more feared by its declared or undeclared opponents, the friends of the U.S. and the Saudi kingdom. The Lebanese government essentially sided with Hezbollah, making the protest against the Israeli aggression its priority. [2]
There is no need to dwell any further on Israel's most blatant failure: reading the avalanche of critical comments from Israeli sources is more than sufficient and most revealing. One of the sharpest comments was the one expressed by three-time "Defense" minister Moshe Arens, indisputably an expert. He wrote a short article in *Haaretz* that speaks volumes:
"They [Ehud Olmert, Amir Pe
retz and Tzipi Livni] had a few days of glory when they still believed that the IAF's [Israeli Air Force's] bombing of Lebanon would make short shrift of Hezbollah and bring us victory without pain. But as the war they so grossly mismanaged wore on… gradually the air went out of them. Here and there, they still let off some bellicose declarations, but they started looking for an exit — how to extricate themselves from the turn of events they were obviously incapable of managing. They grasped for straws, and what better straw than the United Nations Security Council. No need to score a military victory over Hezbollah. Let the UN declare a cease-fire, and Olmert, Peretz, and Livni can simply declare victory, whether you believe it or not…. The war, which according to our leaders was supposed to restore Israel's deterrent posture, has within one month succeeded in destroying it." [3]
Arens speaks the truth: as Israel proved increasingly unable to score any of the goals that it had set for itself at the onset of its new war, it started looking for an exit. While it compensated for its failure by an escalation in the destructive and revengeful fury that it unleashed over Lebanon, its U.S. sponsors switched their attitude at the UN. After having bought time for Israel for more than three weeks by blocking any attempt at discussing a Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire — one of the most dramatic cases of paralysis in the history of the 61-year old intergovernmental institution — Washington decided to take over and continue Israel's war by diplomatic means.
By switching its attitude, Washington converged again with Paris on the issue of Lebanon. Sharing with the U.S. a common, albeit rival, dedication to taking the most out of Saudi riches, especially by selling the Saudi rulers military hardware [4], Paris regularly and opportunistically stays on the right side of the Saudis every time some strains arise between Washington's agenda and the concerns of its oldest Middle Eastern clients and protégés. Israel's new Lebanon war was such an opportunity: as soon as Israel's murderous aggression proved counterproductive from the standpoint of the Saudi ruling family, who are terrified by an increasing destabilization of the Middle East that could prove fatal for their interests, they requested a cessation of the war and a switch to alternative means.
Paris immediately came out in favor of this attitude, and Washington ended up following suit, but only after giving the Israeli aggression a few more days to try to score some face-saving military achievement. The first draft resolution crafted by the two capitals circulated at the UN on August 5. It was a blatant attempt at achieving diplomatically what Israel had not been able to achieve militarily. The draft, while stating "strong support" for Lebanon's sovereignty, nevertheless called for the reopening of its airports and harbors only "for verifiably and purely civilian purposes" and provided for the establishment of an "international embargo on the sale or supply of arms and related material to Lebanon except as authorized by its government," in other words an embargo on Hezbollah.
It reasserted resolution 1559, calling for a further resolution that would authorize "under Chapter VII of the Charter the deployment of a UN-mandated international force to support the Lebanese armed forces and government in providing a secure environment and contribute to the implementation of a permanent cease-fire and a long-term solution." This formulation is so vague that it could only mean, actually, an international force authorized to wage military operations (Chapter VII of the UN Charter) in order to implement resolution 1559 by force, in alliance with the Lebanese army. Moreover, no provision restricted this force to the area south of the Litani River, the area which under the draft resolution was to be free of Hezbollah's armament, and the limit of the zone that Israel has requested to be secured after having failed to get rid of Hezbollah in the rest of Lebanon. This meant that the UN force could have been called upon to act against Hezbollah in the rest of Lebanon.
This project was totally unwarranted by what Israel had achieved on the ground, however, and the draft was therefore defeated. Hezbollah came out strongly against it, making it clear that it would not accept any international force but the existing UNIFIL, the UN force deployed along Lebanon's border with Israel (the "Blue Line") since 1978. The Lebanese government conveyed Hezbollah's opposition and request for changes, backed by the chorus of Arab states including all U.S. clients. Washington had no choice then, but to revise the draft as it would not have passed a vote at the Security Council anyway. Moreover, Washington's ally, French President Jacques Chirac — whose country is expected to provide the major component of the international force and lead it — had himself declared publicly two weeks into the fighting that no deployment was possible without prior agreement with Hezbollah. [5]
The draft was therefore revised and renegotiated, while Washington asked Israel to brandish the threat of a major ground offensive and to actually start implementing it as a means of pressure in order to enable Washington to get the best possible deal from its standpoint. In order to facilitate an agreement leading to a ceasefire that became more and more urgent for humanitarian reasons, Hezbollah accepted the deployment of 15,000 Lebanese troops south of the Litani River and softened its general position. Resolution 1701 could thus be pushed through at the Security Council on August 11.
Washington and Paris's main concession was to abandon the project of creating an ad-hoc multinational force under Chapter VII. Instead, the resolution authorizes "an increase in the force strength of UNIFIL to a maximum of 15,000 troops," thus revamping and considerably swelling the existing UN force. The main trick, however, was to redefine the mandate of this force so that it could now "assist the Lebanese armed forces in taking steps" towards "the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani river of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL." UNIFIL can now as well "take all necessary action in areas of deployment of its forces and as it deems within its capabilities, to ensure that its area of operations is not utilized for hostile activities of any kind."
Combined, the two precedent formulations come quite close to a Chapter VII mandate, or could easily be interpreted in this way, at any rate. Moreover, the mandate of UNIFIL is actually extended by Resolution 1701 beyond its "areas of deployement," as it can now "assist the government of Lebanon at its request" in its effort to "secure its borders and other entry points to prevent the entry in Lebanon without its consent of arms or related
materiel" — a sentence that definitely does not refer to Lebanon's border with Israel but to its border with Syria, which runs the length of the country, from north to south. These are the major traps in Resolution 1701, and not the wording about the withdrawal of the Israeli occupation army that many comments have focused on, as Israel's withdrawal is actually propelled by the deterrent force of Hezbollah, not by any UN resolution.
Hezbollah decided to give its green light for the approval by the Lebanese government of Resolution 1701. Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech on August 12, explaining the decision of the party to agree to the UN-mandated deployment. It included a much more sober assessment of the situation than in some of his previous speeches and a good deal of political wisdom. "Today, Nasrallah said, we face the *reasonable and possible* natural results of the great steadfastness that the Lebanese expressed from their various positions." This soberness was necessary, as any boastful claim of victory — like those that where cheaply expressed by Hezbollah's backers in Tehran and Damascus — would have required Nasrallah to add, like king Pyrrhus of Ancient Greece, "One more such victory and I shall be lost!" Hezbollah's leader wisely and explicitly rejected entering into a polemic about the assessment of the war's results, stressing that "our real priority" is to stop the aggression, recover the occupied territory and "achieve security and stability in our country and the return of the refugees and displaced persons."
Nasrallah defined the practical position of his movement as such: to abide by the ceasefire; to fully cooperate with "all that can facilitate the return of our displaced and refugee people to their homes, to their houses, and all that can facilitate humanitarian and rescue operations." He did so while expressing the readiness of his movement to continue the legitimate fight against the Israeli army as long as it remains in Lebanese territory, though he offered to respect the 1996 agreement whereby operations of both sides would be restricted to military targets and spare civilians. In this regard, Nasrallah stressed that his movement started shelling northern Israel only as a reaction to Israel's bombing of Lebanon after the July 12 operation, and that Israel was to be blamed for extending the war to the civilians in the first place.
Nasrallah then stated a position toward Resolution 1701 that could best be described as approval with many reservations, pending verification in practical implementation. He expressed his protest against the unfairness of the resolution, which refrained in its preambles from any condemnation of Israel's aggression and war crimes, adding however that it could have been much worse and expressing his appreciation for the diplomatic efforts that prevented that from happening. His key point was to stress the fact that Hezbollah considers some of the issues that the resolution dealt with to be Lebanese internal affairs that ought to be discussed and settled by the Lebanese themselves — to which he added an emphasis on preserving Lebanese national unity and solidarity.
Nasrallah's position was the most correct possible given the circumstances. Hezbollah had to make concessions to facilitate the ending of the war. As the whole population of Lebanon was held hostage by Israel, any intransigent attitude would have had terrible humanitarian consequences over and above the already appalling results of Israel's destructive and murderous fury. Hezbollah knows perfectly well that the real issue is less the wording of a UN Security Council resolution than its actual interpretation and implementation, and in that respect what is determinant is the situation and balance of forces on the ground. To George W. Bush's and Ehud Olmert's vain boasting about their victory as embodied supposedly in Resolution 1701, one needs only to quote Moshe Arens pre-emptive reply in the already quoted article: "The appropriate rhetoric has already started flying. So what if the whole world sees this diplomatic arrangement — which Israel agreed to while it was still receiving a daily dose of Hezbollah rockets — as a defeat suffered by Israel at the hands of a few thousand Hezbollah fighters? So what if nobody believes that an 'emboldened' UNIFIL force will disarm Hezbollah, and that Hezbollah with thousands of rockets still in its arsenal and truly emboldened by this month's success against the mighty Israel Defense Forces, will now become a partner for peace?"
The real "continuation of the war by other means" has already started in full in Lebanon. At stake are four main issues, here reviewed in reverse order of priority. The first issue, on the domestic Lebanese level, is the fate of the cabinet. The existing parliamentary majority in Lebanon resulted from elections flawed by a defective and distorting electoral law that the Syrian-dominated regime had enforced. One of its major consequences was the distortion of the representation of the Christian constituencies, with great under-representation of the movement led by former General Michel Aoun who entered into an alliance with Hezbollah after the election. Moreover, the recent war affected deeply the political mood of the Lebanese population, and the legitimacy of the present parliamentary majority is thus highly disputable. Of course, any change in the government in favor of Hezbollah and its allies would radically alter the meaning of resolution 1701 as its interpretation depends very much on the Lebanese government's attitude. One major concern in this regard, however, is to avoid any slide toward a renewed civil war in Lebanon: That's what Hassan Nasrallah had in mind when he emphasized the importance of "national unity."
The second issue, also on the domestic Lebanese level, is the reconstruction effort. Hariri and his Saudi backers had built up their political influence in Lebanon by dominating the reconstruction efforts after Lebanon's 15-year war ended in 1990. This time they will be faced by an intensive competition from Hezbollah, with Iran standing behind it and with the advantage of its intimate link with the Lebanese Shiite population that was the principal target of the Israeli war of revenge. As senior Israeli military analyst Ze'ev Schiff put it in *Haaretz*: "A lot also depends on who will aid in the reconstruction of southern Lebanon; if it is done by Hezbollah, the Shiite population of the south will be indebted to Tehran. This should be prevented." [6] This message has been received loud and clear in Washington, Riyadh and Beirut. Prominent articles in today's mainstream press in the U.S. are sounding the alarm on this score.
The third issue,
naturally, is the "disarmament" of Hezbollah in the zone delimited in southern Lebanon for the joint deployment of the Lebanese army and the revamped UNIFIL. The most that Hezbollah is ready to concede in this respect is to "hide" its weapons south of the Litani River, i.e. to refrain from displaying them and to keep them in covert storage. Any step beyond that, not to mention a Lebanon-wide disarmament of Hezbollah, is linked by the organization to a set of conditions that start from Lebanon's recovery of the 1967-occupied Shebaa farms and end with the emergence of a government and army able and determined to defend the country's sovereignty against Israel. This issue is the first major problem against which the implementation of Resolution 1701 could stumble, as no country on earth is readily in a position to try to disarm Hezbollah by force, a task that the most formidable modern army in the whole Middle East and one of the world's major military powers has blatantly failed to achieve. This means that any deployment south of the Litani River, whether Lebanese or UN-mandated, will have to accept Hezbollah's offer, with or without camouflage.
The fourth issue, of course, is the composition and intent of the new UNIFIL contingents. The original plan of Washington and Paris was to repeat in Lebanon what is taking place in Afghanistan where a NATO auxiliary force with a UN fig leaf is waging Washington's war. Hezbollah's resilience on the military as well as on the political level thwarted this plan. Washington and Paris believed they could implement it nevertheless under a disguised form and gradually, until political conditions were met in Lebanon for a showdown pitting NATO and its local allies against Hezbollah. Indeed, the countries expected to send the principal contingents are all NATO members: along with France, Italy and Turkey are on standby, while Germany and Spain are being urged to follow suit. Hezbollah is no fool however. It is already engaged in dissuading France from executing its plan of sending elite combat troops backed by the stationing of the single French air-carrier close to Lebanon's shores in the Mediterranean.
On the last issue, the antiwar movement in NATO countries could greatly help the struggle of the Lebanese national resistance and the cause of peace in Lebanon by mobilizing against the dispatch of any NATO troops to Lebanon, thus contributing to deterring their governments from trying to do Washington's and Israel's dirty work. What Lebanon needs is the presence of truly neutral peacekeeping forces at its southern borders and, above all, that its people be permitted to settle Lebanon's internal problems through peaceful political means. All other roads lead to a renewal of Lebanon's civil war, at a time when the Middle East, and the whole world for that matter, is already having a hard time coping with the consequences of the civil war that Washington has ignited and is fueling in Iraq.
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Notes
1. On the global and regional implications of these events, see my article "The Sinking Ship of U.S. Imperial Designs," posted on ZNet, August 7, 2006.
2. As an Israeli observer put it in an article with a quite revealing title: "It was a mistake to believe that military pressure could generate a process whereby the Lebanese government would disarm Hizbullah." Efraim Inbar, "Prepare for the next round," *Jerusalem Post*, August 15, 2006.
3. Moshe Arens, "Let the devil take tomorrow," *Haaretz*, August 13, 2006.
4. Both the U.S. and France concluded major arms deals with the Saudis in July.
5. Interview with *Le Monde*, July 27, 2006.
6. Ze'ev Schiff, "Delayed ground offensive clashes with diplomatic timetable," *Haaretz*, August 13, 2006.
Gilbert Achcar grew up in Lebanon and teaches political science at the University of Paris-VIII. His best-selling book The Clash of Barbarisms just came out in a second expanded edition and a book of his dialogues with Noam Chomsky on the Middle East, Perilous Power, is forthcoming, both from Paradigm Publishers. Stephen R. Shalom, the editor of Perilous Power, has kindly edited this article.

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