David, Goliath and Saul: repercussions on Israel of the 2006 war
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The story of David and Goliath epitomizes the supremacy of intelligence, acumen, pragmatism and faith in God, over strength, power, military might and numbers. It is easy, of course, to illustrate the confrontation of David with Goliath in Bint Jbeil as an embodiment of this equation, but in a reversal of roles; the Arabs, represented by Hezbollah, were David this time, the weaker opponent armed with faith and intelligence, against power and formidable strength. However, there is another aspect of the myth, not addressed yet; Saul’s jealousy of David could as easily have illustrated one of the parties to the war on Lebanon. David’s king, Saul, who had failed so far to defeat Goliath, envied David his success and saw him as a threat. He harboured malicious intent towards him and resolved to pursue him until he was able to kill him (1 Samuel 17).

Keywords: Lebanon; Israel; UN Resolution 1701; Israeli political parties; Syria

The decision-making process

The entire Israeli decision-making process surrounding the attack on Lebanon in 2006, from launching the war to accepting Resolution 1701, is now a matter of public debate, after its details were leaked to the press by competing Israeli ministries, each claiming to have realized what was really going on earlier than the others, and placing the blame for misjudgements and failures on someone else’s doorstep. The present author wonders whether the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is behind the latest and longest book on the subject, published on the eve of Yom Kippur (Benn and Eldar 2006). The book glorifies the role and pragmatism of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in agreeing to an early ceasefire, and realizing the uselessness of the ground operation. Allegations made in the book should, however, be taken with caution as the veracity of what it refers to as facts cannot be guaranteed. What matters now is that we understand, from the leaked information, that the war was not a forgone conclusion, that the American and Arab positions were significant in the decision-making process, and that the new element was the fact that Israel, for the first time ever, launched a war without coming under international pressure to end it. This became evident at the G8 Summit that adopted, in the first few days of the war, the Israeli position on the basis that it was exercising its ‘right of self-defence’. This was also evident in rumours to the effect that Israel did not like the first draft of Resolution 1701, and put pressure on the United States and France to change it to its advantage, by staging a large-scale operation two days before the cessation of hostilities came into effect (Bolton 2008).¹

Under the heading ‘How decisions were made’, Aluf Benn wrote that the ‘decision to venture into a large-scale military operation in Lebanon, in response to

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the kidnapping of the soldiers near Zariit, on July 12th, was made in record speed!' (Benn 2006). Israeli politicians were already in deep water after the resistance had kidnapped an Israeli soldier in Gaza two and-a-half weeks earlier, barely one month after Israel had carried out an extensive military operation in the area.

It was clear that Olmert and Peretz’s quick response came as the result of pressure on the newly formed government to quickly prove its worth, and demonstrate that the two civilians at its head were as knowledgeable and militarily capable as any army generals. The kidnapping in Lebanon, which came on the heels of that in Gaza, clearly compelled the Israeli government, after barely three months in power, to put an end to its seemingly increasing inability to deter such operations. Though all of the above elucidates the hidden motives behind the ferocity, speed and scale of the response, it does not justify turning the counter-attack into an all-out war. This was not a decision taken nervously or in haste, but after carefully calculating the regional and international time factor, and deeming it the right opportunity to deal Hezbollah a fatal blow. Discussions with the United States, which conveyed to them a number of Arab states’ positions in favour of a strike against the resistance, only reinforced this view.

These two regional and international factors coincided with the opinion of the Israeli military establishment, which needed to regain its aura of deterrence and strike Hezbollah’s missile capability. It also coincided with an Israeli media campaign in support of the war, coupled with a firm conviction within the Israeli defence establishment that war against Hezbollah was inevitable and that postponing it would only give the latter more time to increase its capability. The United States had already shared its strategy for Lebanon, its plans against Iran and Syria and the compliant attitude of major Arab regimes with Olmert, the army’s Chief of Staff and with the Israeli ministers of foreign affairs and defence. This statement’s veracity was left in no doubt when ministers of foreign affairs from a number of major Arab countries restated it at their meeting in Cairo (Saudi News Agency 2006; Arab Foreign Ministers Meeting 2006). More than one Israeli source, including Olmert himself, has confirmed that direct contacts with Arab states with which Israel had no peace agreement took place during the war (Olmert 2006b).

Thus, Israel embarked on an all-out war against Lebanon and this time round, in contrast with the response to which the Israeli people had become accustomed, its adversary, apart from the will to fight, had a solid and intelligent comprehensive defence strategy, six years in the making, aimed at preventing a rerun of the 1982 experience. After the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon at that time, this defence strategy had become the resistance’s raison d’être, and only means of survival.

Although this reasoning does not convince those who disagree with Hezbollah in Lebanon, it remains nonetheless a fact that Hezbollah’s strategy (strategy not ideology) until July 2006 was solely intended for Lebanon’s defence (with the Shebaa Farms and prisoner issues as priorities), rather than for ‘liberating Palestine’.

On the evening of 12 July 2006, Olmert submitted to his government a plan to carry out air strikes against Hezbollah’s missile-launching platforms (which later proved to be futile), and against symbols of the Lebanese government, mainly the Rafik Hariri International Airport, and the country’s seaports. He told his ministers that Haifa would be vulnerable to retaliation, and that the military campaign would not be short-lived. He gave them estimates regarding the number of missiles that
could be expected to fall on Israel and the number of potential casualties, prior to the
government’s unanimous agreement on the plan.

Shimon Perez never received an adequate answer to his question regarding
phases two, three and four of the operation. Newspapers reported after this meeting
that Perez had constantly repeated: ‘We either launch an all-out war against
Hezbollah and keep going until the very end, or we accept a ceasefire, negotiations
and a prisoner exchange’; he personally favoured the first option.

In the midst of the critical review of the war, Israeli newspapers reported, on 27
August, that the commander-in-chief of the army had told Olmert, on the day that
followed the shelling, that Hezbollah’s missile-launching platforms had already been
destroyed, and that Israel had practically won the war.

On the fourth day, the Israeli government endorsed the second strategic decision,
involving the bombardment of Hezbollah’s headquarters in the south of Beirut. This
decision, taken in coordination with the Americans and their Arab allies, confirmed
what many already believed, namely that it was an all-out war, and convinced
sceptics that it was not just a small- or large-scale tactical operation.

Meanwhile, the Israeli Knesset held a farcical session that looked more like an
oratory contest and had hardly anything to do with reality or decision-making, and
the Speaker of the Knesset called for weekly sessions, despite the fact that parliament
was in recess. These were not regular parliamentary sessions but, just like the
presentations in the Israeli media, they were mobilization and propaganda exercises
involving a lot of grandstanding for the media, in which the military sometimes
participated as parliament’s guests. They were typical wartime displays of
chauvinism and nationalism, full of incitement against the Arabs, coupled with a
total inability to consider ‘other’ opinion. As expected, the pluralism of the ‘Jewish
democracy’ (as Israel likes to define itself) broke-down as soon as the war started,
while on the Arab side political pluralism became more acute, especially in their
press—the Arab press was far more pluralistic and nuanced in conveying a wide-
range of opinion during the war than its Israeli counterpart.

The third strategic decision, never debated at any level, let alone publicly, had to
do with the deployment of ground forces in southern Lebanon in order to destroy
Hezbollah’s advanced positions. The government and the army decided on this while
still pretending, in the first few days of the war, that operations would be limited to
air strikes and would not involve any return to the 1982 ‘quagmire’ in Lebanon.
When the air force failed to achieve results, ground operations gradually expanded,
shrank and expanded again, off and on for the rest of the war, depending on the way
the battle was progressing, on the resistance’s reaction and on the unexpected
casualty toll.

The objectives of the war, which the Israelis never stopped calling ‘the
operation’, were rather murky and kept changing as the battle progressed, ranging
from the destruction of Hezbollah’s potential, to dismantling it or just weakening it
and pushing it north of the Litani River. However, the destruction of Hezbollah was
in any case no longer an achievable goal, and military leaders replaced it with new
and unmeasurable objectives such as weakening Hezbollah. At this point, another
new political cover as a public political goal of the war, namely the need to
implement Resolution 1559 (Olmert 2006a), supplanted all the others. Israel
appointed itself enforcer of international resolutions, and this ended any pretence
that the war could have a justifiable excuse, given Israel’s notorious treatment of
international resolutions. Moreover, no one believes official reasons and justifications for war anymore, as is the case with the American war in Iraq, though this does not prevent wars from happening.

If one is to believe the stated objectives of the Israeli military campaign, and the unanimous position of the G8 countries regarding Israel’s right of self-defence, then the war was a precursor to the implementation of Resolution 1559, which calls for the disarmament of Hezbollah and the deployment of the Lebanese army over the whole of Lebanese territory. These two requirements were embodied in Security Council Resolution 1701, which practically adopted the same aims as Resolution 1559, in blatant disregard of the defeat of the Israeli offensive on the ground. Israel announced its intention to establish a ‘buffer zone’, or a ‘security belt’, on the Lebanese side of the border to prevent Hezbollah from returning to it. It put the ball into the international community’s court by making its withdrawal contingent upon the international community’s agreement to send multinational forces to Lebanon. The balance of power in the Security Council had nothing to do with the balance of powers on the ground, however. Israel got exactly what it wanted when the multinational force was expanded and granted prerogatives above and beyond those of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

In the middle of the war, under the title ‘Were the goals achieved?’ Zeev Schiff (Schiff 2006) wrote that statements made by Israeli leaders, and high ranking officers during the war, gave the impression that Israel’s goals were constantly changing and not clear enough. He added that, ‘two weeks after the war started, Israel had yet to achieve any of its main objectives’. Hezbollah’s ‘war of attrition’ against Israel went on unabated with no sign that its missile-launching capability, which averaged 80 to 100 missiles per day, was decreasing; far from it, it actually doubled each time Israel announced the successful destruction of Hezbollah’s missile capability. Schiff also wrote that, despite the Israeli army’s heavy air and ground bombardment, Hezbollah’s military capability was yet to be seriously impaired, and that their motivation to fight was still intact. He added that Hezbollah fighters did not run but stood and fought, that most of the party’s leadership was still intact, that its logistical infrastructure had not been seriously impaired and that it still possessed large amounts of ammunition, including long-range missiles.

Furthermore, and under the title ‘Did the army fail,’ Amos Harel (Harel 2006) wrote that officers stationed in the northern region had warned that the security situation along the border ‘had become unbearable’, and that it carried ‘the seeds of future kidnappings’, but that the government had disregarded these warnings. On the other hand, he indicated that the army had not been of the same mind, as evidenced by the opinion held by some high-ranking officers in intelligence and operations, that the missile threat was not real and that the best solution was to leave them to rust in their warehouses. He added that the war uncovered a serious lack of military intelligence data, including a lack of information regarding the missile technology Hezbollah had acquired, allowing it to strike an Israeli warship off the coast of Beirut. Army units stationed opposite Hezbollah’s positions were surprised by the extent of the defensive and offensive capability that the latter had managed to establish near the border; indeed, some officers were astonished by what they saw in Maroon al-Ras, Mirwaheen, ‘Aita al-Shaab and Bint Jbeil. Military intelligence, for its part, claimed that it gave extensive information on the subject to the army, whose duty it was to convey it to units on the ground. The debate still rages as to whether
this was a failure of military intelligence or poor management of the army. It was left
to the investigation committee to have the last word in this dispute.

A number of experts had advised the military to narrow down the declared aims
of the war, which confronted Israel with two basic problems. The first was that
dealing a severe blow to Hezbollah would strengthen the Lebanese government,
which then further increased the list of unachieved aims. The second was the
necessity of reaching a political compromise with Lebanon, either directly, or
indirectly through the Security Council, which would prohibit Iran and Syria from
rearming Hezbollah after the war ahead of future confrontations.

There is no doubt that American diplomacy calibrated the pace of its activities to
suit Israel’s military situation, help it translate its ‘achievements’ into facts on the
ground and make it possible for the US to come to Israel’s rescue if need be. Meron
Benvenisti (2006) saw a strange contradiction, inherent in the notion of empowering the
Lebanese government, which made him wonder, ‘How could serious human beings
justify the destruction of an entire country under the pretext of helping its government?’
The answer to this question, which is the object of debate in both Lebanon and
Palestine, namely the legitimacy of appealing to Israel to help solve internal problems in
countries still considered to be in a state of war with it, is in the hands of the Lebanese
government and public opinion. The answer that most expected soon came when those
who speak in the name of factions represented in the Lebanese government, mainly
sectarian chiefs rather than ministers, made any eventual ceasefire contingent upon a
non-return to the status quo ante. This was an unexpected response to Benvenisti’s
question. Discussions round the issues of Resolution 1701, its application and the
disarmament of the resistance on the same morning the ceasefire came into effect were
in a similar vein. The fact that Israel is now party to a conflict between two Arab
adversaries will unavoidably have serious long-term repercussions, especially in light of
the Arab public’s distaste for such turns of events.

Following the battle of Bint Jbeil, Haaretz continued homing in on the target. In
an editorial published on 27 July, it said that inflicting real and tangible damage on
Hezbollah in order to bolster the position of those Lebanese who refused to remain
hostage to Iran and Syria was vital to ensure the stability and sustainability of the
security measures in place and the deployment of multinational forces. The
newspaper accused Israel’s political administration and army of not understanding
what the United States and the people had already understood—that an early cease-
fire was useless and that they has to go on fighting, leaving the complex of 1982
aside. The prevalent ideology, both in the press and amongst the Israeli public, was
very reminiscent of the way neo-conservatives conceive of changing the status quo in
the region.

American ideology and the opinion of Israelis on the street coincide with the
views of those Arabs who oppose the resistance, especially with respect to the excuses
and faulty logic used to justify actions. The latter see the war as a golden opportunity
to get rid of the resistance without having to dirty their hands, even if it was the
Israeli army that did the deed. What is most noteworthy, however, is that the Arab
elite knew full well the real reasons behind the war, namely the annexation of
Lebanon once and for all to the pro-American axis in the region.

As part of the effort to conceal Israel’s astonishment at the strength of
Hezbollah’s fighters and to facilitate the assimilation of the unexpected losses,
Ma’ariv published on the same day (27 July), i.e. straight after the battle of Bint
Jbeil, an article (Dankner and Margalit 2006) that lauded Israeli endurance and resilience after a few soldiers were killed in Bint Jbeil at the hands of a ruthless enemy ‘who kills our soldiers’. The astounded reader would surely realize the absurdity of the horrified astonishment at how a fighter could kill an enemy soldier in war. Only in Israel can one hear and read a description of one’s self as a helpless victim in a war by the very people who displaced more than a million individuals, killed over 1,500, maimed many thousands more and ruined the future of hundreds of thousands. Dankner and Margalit (2006), who claim to speak in the name of the establishment and public opinion, go on to say, ‘We have to harden our hearts’ as if their hearts were ever tender and merciful, and only changed when ten of their soldiers were killed in the battle of Bint Jbeil. They also write, ‘The army should not risk the lives of our soldiers’, and ‘villages and cities should be destroyed from the air before soldiers are sent in’, and then call this hysteria ‘endurance’! The next day, 28 July, Rafi Ginat, editor in chief of *Yadiot Ahronot*, joined them in calling for the destruction of every village before soldiers go into them, so that ‘not a single young man from the Golani Brigade is wounded’. This proposition actually got through to the attentive ears of eager politicians needing to gain public support. Haim Ramon, who was facing charges of sexual harassment, adopted this proposition and put it forward at the following day’s inner security cabinet meeting. Eli Yishai, President of the SHAS (Federation of Sephards’ Torah Guardians) List, demanded that no village be entered without ‘turning it first into a sandbox’, a creative and resourceful expression inspired by the creativity of the SHAS Party, and the populist racist political culture represented by Rabbi Obadia Youseph (*Ma’ariv*, 9 August 2006).

Of course, neither the dimensions of destruction of civil life in Lebanon by the Israeli army, nor the very decision to go to war, will ever be the subject of investigation. The only subject will be what are the technical and military reasons for the defeat.

The fourth and final stage of the decision-making process concerned Secretary Rice leaving behind in Israel a team of experts to work closely with the Israeli leadership on a settlement plan involving a multinational force in Lebanon (in coordination with Israel, even before Blair) (*Yadiot Ahronot*, 28 July 2006). This force would deploy in a narrow sector of southern Lebanon, undertake an exchange of prisoners with the smallest cost possible to Israel (Benn and Eldar 2006) and disarm Hezbollah, no less. This coincided with the amendment of both the Security Council’s Resolution and Israel’s objectives in the war, as the result of a thorough evaluation, in conjunction with the Americans, of Israel’s military situation and the political situation that prevailed in Lebanon, the Arab world and the region. This is further proof that this was in every respect, an American war, especially in the way it ended and its specified gains.

Press reports of 28 July indicate that sharp disagreements round political and security issues surfaced at the security cabinet meeting of 27 July between the Mossad and military intelligence about the exact nature of the damage that had been inflicted on Hezbollah thus far. While both sides agreed that Hezbollah was indeed weaker thanks to Israel’s air bombardment, Meir Dagan and Mossad believed that it would still be able to prosecute the war at the same level for a long time. Military intelligence, on the other hand, insisted that Hezbollah had received a much harsher blow than Mossad believed.

The inner security cabinet decided not to expand military operations but to keep them in their present form, and approved the security services’ recommendation for
a large-scale recruitment of reserves to reactivate and ‘prepare them for any
eventuality’ (i.e. potential expansion of operations). The army’s command asked for
a large-scale recruitment of reserves for a two-month ground operation to ‘expel
Hezbollah from areas south of the Litany River’, but a number of ministers opposed
any expansion of ground operations. The cabinet agreed that any expansion of
military operation or deployment of recruits would be contingent upon another
separate approval by the security cabinet. (According to Haaretz, this was to avoid
provoking Syria, a notion further confirmed by Yadiot Ahronot, 28 July).

There was consensus among the Ministers that a confrontation with Syria should
be avoided at all costs, and Olmert stated that he did not want to open a third front.
It would be wrong to understand Olmert’s statement as a move against a general
desire in Israel to avoid opening two fronts at the same time. Olmert was not
expressing a wish to reach an understanding with Syria, and the chance of Syria
receiving a preventive strike is still high, in the present author’s opinion.

From an Israeli perspective, delaying the ground operation was a bad decision,
but expanding these operations and pushing the reserve units into the ground battle
a few days before the war’s end was an even worse one. The cabinet took this
decision on Wednesday, 9 August, and put it into force on Friday, 11 August, two
days before the ceasefire came into effect. The intention was to influence ongoing
debates at the Security Council and to reverse as much as possible of the public
perception that the army and the government had been remiss in their duties, before
debates started in earnest.

**Initial repercussions**

Although the Israeli ruling establishment is still trying to absorb and overcome the
fallout from the war on Lebanon, the security cabinet’s proposal to allocate 35
billion Shekels to prepare Israel for the next war, based on the analysis and results of
the present one, is but an indication of the conclusions reached and their cost.

All Israeli newspapers of 22 and 23 August published the official estimates of the
total cost of the war on Lebanon, which stood at 23 billion Shekels, distributed as
follows: according to Kobi Haber, Budget Director at the Israeli Ministry of Finance,
Israel’s economic development, which was on track to reach 5.2–5.5% in 2006, will drop

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Description of costs</th>
<th>Amount in Shekels</th>
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<tr>
<td>Security service costs</td>
<td>7 billion</td>
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<td>Direct and indirect damage to regions directly hit by the war and northern regions where economic activity was crippled</td>
<td>5 billion</td>
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<td>An estimated 1.5% loss of revenue (Ministry of Finance figures)</td>
<td>9 billion (including the loss of 2 billion Shekels due to an expected drop in tax revenues)</td>
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<td>Assistance and subsidies to local councils in the north, and for civil defence, salvage operations, etc.</td>
<td>2 billion</td>
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Sources: Haaretz, Yadiot Ahronot and Ma’ariv, 22–23 August 2006.
to less than 4% as a result of the war, which means a fall in the country’s rate of
development. However, it is important to note that Israel’s growth rate is still on the rise,
and is higher now than it was during the first three years that followed the start of the
second intifada, for instance.

According to data provided by Dun and Bradstreet (D&B), and published on 20
August in *Globus Magazine*, the percentage of commercial businesses at risk of
closure in Israel, increased by 3% by the end of the war, or rose from 23% in July to
26% in the third week of August. D&B expect a further deterioration in the economic
situation unless some form of government compensation mechanism is put in place
urgently. *Globus* had previously stated on 16 August 2006 that according to D&B’s
‘risk measurement’ for the month of July, the Israeli economy had shown a slight
deterioration in commercial risk-taking, reaching a danger zone of 5.86 in comparison to 5.81 in June, which naturally also implies an expected drop in
investment levels. Economists at D&B expect the impact of the war to become
evident in the next few months, along with a serious deterioration in most sectors of
the economy.

There seems to be no doubt that the damage increase and that figures will worsen
with the passage of time, as the long-term impact on the economy becomes more
obvious. At the same time, it is to be hoped that Arab researchers, politicians and
pundits will not hasten to the conclusion, as they did when suicide operations were
happening, that the Israeli economy is on the verge of collapse. This article does not
recommend that undue importance be given to these figures or to the economic
losses—this is not what is important. The Israeli economy is still capable of
absorbing the shock and overcoming the impact of the war, especially in view of the
2006 budget surplus, and subsidies paid by the United States.

The October 1973 war had a greater and more serious impact on the Israeli
economy, yet it was able to adapt its infrastructure and even achieve an upturn after
the peace agreement with Egypt, revealing the full strength of its underlying
potential. It was at this point that the Israeli economy became a developed capitalist
economy.

Despite our assessment of what is going on today in Israel, we have to keep in
mind that the level of frustration, internal conflict, debate and protest were deeper
and more acute after the October war than they are today. Yet, despite all the deep
wounds and scars, Israeli politics, society and economy managed to overcome it all
by changing and adapting to the new situation. This is why we should not rush to
mourn the Zionist project, or pretend that this was the first real war for Israel. Both
the 1973 and 1948 wars were also real wars as far as Israel was concerned.
Furthermore, and despite our objective view of the size and power of the resistance,
they and their supporters should not become conceited and arrogant. Our analysis of
the Lebanese resistance indicates that humility, succinctness, diligent planning, and
courage are the characteristics that distinguish this resistance movement from others
that have preceded it, and make it a refreshing novelty on the Arab political scene.
However, a certain lack of realism is to be detected in its recent self-analysis, and in
the manner in which it views the outcome, and one can only hope that this is a
temporary phenomenon, a matter of mood, presented for media purposes or an
effort to counter deceitful attempts of internal political rivals to belittle the victory
achieved. If not, this state of affairs will eventually lead the resistance to erroneous
political conclusions.
Israel bemoans the discovery of itself

Israel suffered real political paralysis after the war, but it was saved by renewing the Arab peace initiative and the so-called peace process pushed by the American administration after the war, a process for process’s sake. Although Israel suffers from a moral and cultural crisis, as well as from a chronic existential dilemma, it can be stated with certainty that it is not in a state of disintegration as the result of the debacle in Lebanon. The crisis, such as it is, however, is kept hidden behind factors that cement internal cohesion in a modern state, namely a strong common national identity and the harmony of that identity with the concept of citizenship; the non-politicization of basic affiliations, such as sectarian loyalties; and the synergy of the economic infrastructure.

In contrast, the United States takes advantage of the lack of these factors in Arab countries, which is a result mainly of the self-interested colonial demarcation of boundaries, to destabilize them and tear co-existing sectarian groups apart.

There is at present in Israel a Zionist ideological vacuum and a common feeling of loss resulting from the collapse of the ideologies of political parties, the absence of any historical leadership, and widespread corruption. These are currently being replaced by, on the one hand, religious zeal and, on the other, by an ideology of individual consumerism, characterized by a feeling of repugnance towards politics and politicians, and destabilizing ideological sources of legitimacy. To compensate for this state of loss, the only clear trend emerging at present is the increasing ability of the right to take advantage of the crisis.

The war on Lebanon was the result of a convergence between Israel’s security requirements and America’s political priorities in the region. Israel undoubtedly feels threatened by the fact that an ideological resistance movement, namely Hezbollah, rather than a state, is in possession of a considerable missile capability, especially since this movement never sought to establish peace with Israel.

This unease was mainly evident in the generals’ view that the inevitable battle against Hezbollah ought not to be postponed, but waged as soon as the right opportunity arose. They considered any postponement as giving Hezbollah the chance to strengthen itself, choose the timing of the next war and launch missile strikes against Israel in the event of a war on Iran, the worst possible timing for Israel. The Israeli political and security agenda coincided well with America’s strategy in the region. Both Israel and the United States are aware that Hezbollah’s missile arsenal is a potential threat only used for deterrence and that, unlike Israel’s military methods against Lebanon, it has never really targeted civilian populations, not even during its protracted resistance against occupation between 1982 and 2000. They also know that the resistance’s missile capability does not pose an existential threat to Israel. They see Hezbollah, rather, as an internal political and social obstacle to bringing Lebanon into the American–Israeli fold, an impediment to the isolation of Syria, as well as Iran. American and Israeli agendas met in understanding that defeating or even relinquishing this force would deprive Syria and Iran and the whole ‘axis’ that rejects total American hegemony of one of its moral and ideological sources of strength.

As far as Israel’s military deterrence is concerned, the outcome of the recent war has turned Lebanon, contrary to Israel’s expectation, into an appealing Arab model for a typical Arab society repressed by its own regime. It has shown that the capability of Arabs to fight is only tamed and oppressed, and actually perverted, by the regimes themselves. The war’s outcome has also made the Arabs ask themselves
what they should conclude from this aggression, and from the effective and methodical manner in which it was dealt with. These are Arab young men who fought this war—so determined and so professional—how do we differ from them?

Israel will not collapse solely as the result of the war, nor would Hezbollah ever be able to defeat it in a decisive all-out battle. The resistance’s achievement lies in having aborted the occupier’s attack, and in having given a proof of the possibility of successful resistance, good planning, strong willpower and a wide popular base of support in southern Lebanon. The last is what matters most, because this grassroots resistance movement would have failed had this popular base started complaining, for example, or criticizing the resistance’s leadership in the media, as Israel hoped would happen when the population were terrorized by unprecedented intensive air raids and fire power and the destruction of their villages.

The Israelis wanted a war without paying the price, and the government was acting under pressure from a population that was neither able to pay the price, nor ready to accept that the 1967 war was the exception rather than the rule. This unwillingness on the part of the Israeli public to offer the necessary sacrifice will undoubtedly be one of the most important conclusions of this war.

Israel’s attack on Lebanon failed, but Israel itself did not collapse. Instead, chaos prevailed in a hybrid social infrastructure that has, to a certain extent, a ‘third-world administrative culture’ (as it is called in Israeli political jargon), a religious-based ideology, opportunistic identities in its party politics and a rampant consumer society. The legendary Jewish Zionist fighter of the founders’ generation, who tills the land while carrying his weapon, has disappeared (Haber 2006). Though there are signs of a break-up, it would probably lead to a right-wing militaristic reaction, or to abandoning certain projected steps towards modernization, such as doing away with the large-scale and long-term military service and reservist army in favour of an entirely professional force, like other developed countries. Such notions, however, are not in tune with Zionist ideology which does not conceive of the army only as a military defence tool, but also considers it an ideological tool for building uniformity, the melting pot, and the main tool for nation building, but these notions depart from a new reality and new premise. They acknowledge the fact that Israeli society has become polarized, torn, individualistic and consumer-based, and that the reservists have carried all these flaws, including ideological and political infighting, over into the army. The formation of a professional army could also mean that Israeli society would become less sensitive to deaths among its soldiers than to the death of reserve troops who leave their homes, families and jobs to undergo several weeks of military training. This idea is not new; it surfaces after every crisis of this kind, and several Israeli chiefs of staff, including Ehud Barak, have suggested in the past that the Israeli army should become purely professional, small, fast and smart.

Israelis believe that a strong deterrence capability, and qualitative and quantitative military superiority, especially a nuclear weapons arsenal, are necessary, though insufficient, for their confrontation with the Arabs, as long as there is no peace or, if the Arabs continue to refuse to give in, even though peace prevails with the Arab regimes. However, if not deterred, and it will not be as long as the resistance is there, military power inevitably turns into a ruthless destructive machine against neighbouring societies, as is the case in Palestine and Lebanon, and will only harden these societies’ refusal to accept Israel.
On another level, it is clear that Israel’s military power has always relied in the past on a mobilized, unified and militarized society, due to an amalgam between Zionist ideology and economic austerity. This is now over; Israeli society is not only witnessing social-class divisions, but also divisions on the individual level, in the modern capitalist consumer sense of the term. The gap between rich and poor is growing deeper, discrepancies in the levels of education are widening and there is rampant corruption in the state bureaucracy. All of the above is gradually creating pressure to change the army into a small and modern professional force, separate from the general population. Israel’s deterrence capability has suffered from this war, and its military establishment is in real crisis (Bishara 2005).

Because the Army has become the object of on-going political, social and press debates, the sanctity of the officers’ status was bound to suffer sooner or later. Debates among the public were already raging round the issues of officers’ salaries, sexual abuse in the army, the high number of accidents in military training and the psychological impact of the war. The rule of law and legal controls ventured, as of the late 1980s, into areas, such as the army, which were forbidden to them before. The army is the only one in the world that mainly relies on mandatory military service, the reservists and permanent professional units. This means that when it calls up reservists, it is actually calling up the entire population, with its different social classes and intellectual movements. This makes it the object of social and political debate, simply because reservists are part of the social fabric of the country. Since Israeli society is no longer as mobilized and militarized as it used to be, the soldiers naturally carry the society’s pluralistic nature, as well as the deep divisions within it, into the army.

Israelis consider military service as a stepping-stone towards economic and political success once their tour of duty ends. Major local and international companies that establish branches in Israel usually hire officers and generals and appoint them to key administrative positions, supposedly because they have experience in managing complex and multifaceted institutions. These appointments are the outcome of a typical Israeli hybrid of marketing ventures and military culture that allows these officers to view themselves as naturally qualified to assume government and ministerial positions. This is why officers are very offended when politicians blame various failures on the military, and they insist on rejecting them, first, for professional reasons that have to do with the military and, second, because accusations of failure are liable to affect their careers once their military service is over.

The main goal of Israel’s military in the war was to regain the country’s ‘aura of deterrence’, one of the pillars of Israeli security. This aura, however, was neither regained nor reinstated, because the war demonstrated that air superiority causes a lot of destruction (and might, therefore, deter civilian communities) but will not deter a dug-in and deeply entrenched resistance force. Even when there were ground operations, the resistance was able to regain the momentum and restore the confidence of the communities targeted by Israel’s air strikes. Dan Halutz’s favourite examples were the 72-day NATO bombardment of Serbia, and the American air bombardment of Iraq. In both cases, however, the target was not a resistance force but dictatorships whose citizens were not ready to stand and defend them. In the case of Iraq, at least, the dictatorship had to fall first, before the resistance could take matters into its own hands.

Not only Israel’s aura of deterrence, but also the whole notion of using air power against a resistance movement that enjoys wide popular support, took a beating; air
power is effective against regimes and armies that cannot rely on the support of their citizens. Israel’s air supremacy, however, is more than just a matter of deterrence; it is a strategic concept that transcends deterrence and applies to the matter of warfare itself. Apart from the failure of Israel’s air force to break the will of the people of Lebanon, and in spite of the large-scale destruction it wrought on them, this short war—though long by Israeli standards—undermined the two main pillars of Israel’s military strategy:

1. The principle of ‘exporting’ the war to the enemy’s territory, and preventing it from abutting on its own, fell apart due to the high number of missiles that rained on Israel without its air force being able to stop them. This led to the decision to launch a ground offensive that only deepened Israel’s involvement and exacerbated the problem.

2. The principle of ‘blitzkrieg’, i.e. surprise attack and quick resolution of the battle by destroying the enemy’s defences, including its communications and command structure, or through a swift occupation that avoids Israel getting involved in a long war, also fell apart. The resistance brought it down because, by definition, it is the very antithesis of the notion of blitzkrieg. We must add here that these facts should be borne in mind by those who believed that the resistance would crumble the moment Israel attacked Lebanon.

Israel’s second declared objective in the war kept vacillating between striking Hezbollah’s military potential and keeping it at a distance from Israel’s border. The latter objective, however, which coincided best with America’s own political agenda, proved impossible to achieve without a Security Council resolution. As in the case of Resolution 1559, the United States could have achieved this by exerting pressure in the Security Council, without the need to go to war. As for the deployment of the Lebanese army to the south, the resistance had agreed to this while the war was still on-going, as a tax to pay for the steadfast position of various Lebanese groups who, due to international pressure on them, did not see this war as their own. The resistance also agreed to this deployment because not all social groups in Lebanon saw the war as directed against them, nor did it, in fact, target everyone equally.

As for the achievement of America’s objectives in the war, the battle did not resolve the matter either way. The war shifted the issue to the Lebanese–Israeli front, and when Israel failed to resolve it militarily, the Security Council Resolution brought it back to Lebanon, accompanied by a French force and by official Arab support for the Lebanese government, which started an entirely new phase.

Those who want to come to grips with this new phase will inevitably reach the conclusion that the resistance’s main achievement in the war, thanks to its courage and resilience, was to prevent Israel from achieving its objectives. Since it is Israel that started the war, not the resistance, it was incumbent on Israel to ensure that its objectives were realized. Therefore, by merely causing Israel to fail, through sheer resilience and courage, the resistance has won the war. The resistance did not expect a war, nor did Israel, at least not as far as timing was concerned. Israel was undoubtedly planning to wage war against the resistance at some point, but was surprised by the extent of some Arab states’ cooperation and by America’s wholehearted encouragement, and did not want to waste the opportunity.
The resistance, however, anticipated the way Israel would pursue the war, if it decided to seize an opportunity, and was prepared for it. In contrast, although Israel started the war, it had no idea as to the real strength of the resistance, and was taken aback by it. These factors are very important in determining military failure or success in the present circumstances.

The war as a mainstream goal

It was the centrist movement, which considers itself the most ‘enlightened and secular’ Zionist movement that, in effect, lost the war. The mainstream (the labour movement and its allies) built itself on the legend of Israel’s qualitative moral and technical superiority over its neighbours and the Arabs in general, despite having abandoned its predecessors’ socialist settler agenda. After a period of regression from 1977 to 1999, caused by emergence of religious settler and sectarian parties that represented various identities within Israeli society, the movement attempted to regain its stature and bring back the glories of secular Zionism and nationalism by moving further to the right in a bid to attract large numbers of supporters. This shift to the right involved a revival of the notions of extreme nationalism, emphasizing the ‘Jewishness’ of the State and the abandonment of peace projects that had led to the movement’s weakness in the first place. This abandonment was not in favour of better projects, but in favour of a unilateral dictation of terms. Sharon and Shimon Perez’s alliance within Kadima, and the alliance of Perez with Labour, allowed this temporary reprieve of sorts.

The journalists, writers and thinkers who supported this move to the right, such as A.B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz and Sobol, the latest convert to the right, who had supported peace and the two-state solution before the failure of Camp David II, were now, like the generals, beating the drums and ringing the bells of war. Just like the secular mainstream movement, key figures in the three main Israeli newspapers, who also consider themselves enlightened and mirror the ideology of this movement, were the main proponents of and lobbyists for the war. Other opinions, i.e., the opinions of those who opposed the war itself rather than the manner it was handled, were totally unreported in the press during the war. Everyone, including those who criticized the decision-making process that led to the war, agreed on a number of ‘givens’, such as ‘Israeli democracy is facing an obscure enemy’, and ‘this enemy is indiscriminately targeting civilians’, although every citizen in Israel knew that Hezbollah fired at Israeli cities only after Lebanese cities and villages were bombarded by the Israeli airforce. They were even in agreement in accepting a collection of blatant lies, such as the claim that missiles were launched from civilian homes, in wallowing in self-pity and in rueing the fact that democracy, even in times of war, should adhere to strict rules of morality. Those who criticized these notions and believed that soldiers should be free of pity in order to deal an effective blow to this brutal enemy’s bases, only understand the language of force even if it also involves villages, cities, homes, residential quarters, hospitals, shelters, schools and convoys of fleeing civilians. The debate between support for this false pride in the Israeli army’s actually non-existing moral values, and the call for this same army to do all it could to annihilate the enemy, was one of the vilest and most deceitful debates to fill major newspapers during the war.

It seems that those who think they have a monopoly of rationalism and enlightenment saw the war as an opportunity to reassert themselves and their
identity. They viewed the threat that Israel faced in the north and south as coming this time from ‘dark Islamic religious forces’, and deemed this latest war as the ‘just war’ they had dreamt about and longed for since Israel’s occupation of Lebanon ended in 2000. In fact, they had been longing for it since the 1967 war, which they viewed, despite its preventive nature, as a just pre-emptive war necessary for Israel’s survival that had succeeded in uniting the Israeli people. Adherents of this position did not hide their joy, approval or excitement at this recent war, which they saw as the antithesis of the 1982 Lebanon War, and one that carried the seeds of deliverance from that unfortunate debacle.

To these people, Israel is part of the global axis of good against evil and part of the axis of enlightenment against the forces of darkness; being part of the Western front against the Eastern front is a source of great joy to them. From their perspective, the West had not given them reason to rejoice and celebrate their affiliation to this club by allowing them to stand at the allies’ side in the wars against Iraq and Afghanistan, and had even been embarrassed by their presence and striven to conceal it, which was very frustrating for them. This war not only helped them overcome this complex, but has opened the door for partnership with ‘moderate Arabs’ who were publicly irritated by Hezbollah, blamed it for starting the war, and were obviously fearful of the Iranian axis, which some of them even saw as a greater threat than Israel.

Secular liberal elements were the most eager of all other Israeli groups for a demographic disengagement from the Palestinians in the occupied territories, even without a solution to the Palestinian problem. They were also the most eager for the war in the summer of 2006, because they believed it would reaffirm their secular Western identity in the face of religious ‘fundamentalists’ in Gaza, Lebanon and elsewhere in the world. It would also reaffirm their identity within Israel, for if the war proved successful, and they emerged triumphant, they would not only score a victory over the dark and extreme religious forces within Israel, but would also be a step closer to disengagement from the Palestinians, and to other key objectives. They therefore did their utmost to appear even more in favour of the war than the army or the political right, and their articles came very close to elaborating the entire strategy of the war, and advocated disregard for the fate of Lebanese villages, cities and civilians.

The press was so full of articles of this kind that it is hard to select some to quote as examples. This group’s contribution to the war effort has, in the view of this writer, made a palpable impact on the decision-making process in Israel. They were not mere journalists; in their articles and editorials they exhorted Israel’s leadership, time after time, to go to war with resolve and bring back victory in what they persistently called ‘the most just of all Israel’s wars’. However, they emerged from it with their hands smeared with the blood of the hundreds of children massacred in the war. As for the war’s military outcome, which went contrary to all their expectations, they will not be able to draw any benefit from it, neither inside, nor outside Israel. They were bitterly disappointed and their hopes dashed because, in their view, the Israeli leadership did not properly take advantage of the ‘historical opportunity’ that the West, the United States and ‘moderate’ Arabs had granted Israel. All the elements necessary to build the identity they were seeking for themselves and for Israel, and all they were hoping for, were there for the taking in this war. They were unable to succeed, however,
because Israel did not rise to the occasion and failed to achieve any worthwhile results. This is why, among all Israelis, their reaction was the strongest, and their disappointment the most acute.

War had never been so much a matter of identity politics inside Israel as this time around.

**Israeli political parties**

To assess how all of the above affected Israeli party politics, this article bases itself on the assumption that although Israeli infrastructure and institutions are modern and function efficiently, its party political structure is, by contrast, on the verge of collapse. This structural contradiction, added to the weak cohesiveness of the internal front that the war brought to the surface, will lead to a crisis within ‘Jewish democracy’.

A wide-based survey conducted immediately after the war by the Dahaf Institute (*Yedioth Ahronot* 2006), confirms the existence within the Israeli party political system of a constant disposition towards near collapse. Although this survey is one among many, we choose to include it below because it was the last to appear while this article was being written.

(1) *Who would you vote for if elections to the Knesset were held today?*

Likud 20 (a gain of 8 seats); Kadima 17 (a loss of 12 seats); Yisrael Beiteynu (Lieberman) 17 (+6); Labour 11 (−8); Shas 10 (−1); United Arab List 10; Al Mifdal 7 (−2); Degel HaTorah 5 (−1); Meretz 5; Pensioners’ Party 3 (−4); and non-partisans 15.

The above results reveal clear tendencies. There is a drop in the popularity of the parties in power and an increase in popularity for the extreme rightwing, without the emergence of a single large party. Rather, parties are thinly spread across the political map, and ethnic and religious parties, such as Arab and religious extremist parties, maintain their numbers. Apart from this, the political-party map shows no stability whatsoever.

(2) *How do you evaluate the Prime minister’s performance during the war?*

Good 26%; Not Good, 74%.

(3) *How do you evaluate the performance of Minister of Defence, Amir Peretz, during the war?*

Good 20%, Not Good 79%.

The answers to these two questions reveal a deep lack of trust in the current political leadership. Subsequent surveys showed that the lack of trust was deepening.

(4) *How do you evaluate Dan Halutz’s performance during the war?*

Good 35.5%, Not Good 63%.

This is highly unusual, because trust in the Commander of the Israeli army, regardless of the prevailing circumstances, is usually beyond any doubt.

(5) *Who is the most suitable politician to assume the post of Prime Minister of Israel today?*

Netanyahu 22%; Lieberman 18%; Shimon Peres 12%; Ehud Olmert 11%; Tzipi Livni 10%; Amir Peretz 1%; they are all unsuitable 20%.

Once again, there is no stability in public opinion, and not a single politician has enough support to enable him, or her, to assume the country’s leadership. There is a crisis of trust and a crisis of alternatives in Israel, which means that there is a lack of trust in politics in general, and probably in the system as a whole.
If the contest were between Netanyahu and Olmert, who would you chose?
Netanyahu 45%; Olmert 24%; neither 28%.

Should Olmert resign from his post at the head of Government?
Yes 63%; No 29%.

Should Dan Halutz resign?
Yes 54%; No 38%.

What could be done politically, today?
Hold new elections 27%; form an emergency government 20%; keep the government as it is 19%; remove the Labour Party from the government and include rightwing parties instead 16%; and involve rightwing parties in the government 14%.

Once again, the results show that, although there is clearly a crisis, alternatives are neither clear nor popular, plus a state of instability.

Should Amir Peretz resign from his position as Minister of Defence?
Yes 74%; No 20%.

Who is the best qualified to fill the post of Minister of Defence?
Shaul Mofaz 25%; Ami Ayalon 20%; Boji Ayalon 18%; Lieberman 10%; Ehud Barak 8%; Netanyahu 5%; Amir Perez 3%.

No candidate has the minimum support required to occupy the post of Minister of Defence either.

What do you think of the protest movement organised by reservist soldiers?
Approve 69%; Disapprove 25%.

Peretz’s presence in the Ministry of Defence and Labour’s presence in the government, in the prevailing circumstances, were part of the reason for the absence of any large-scale opposition to the war in Israel, for the Zionist Left had united under the motto ‘no sound rises above that of the battle’. At the beginning of the war, Yossi Beilin, head of the Meretz-Yachad Party, and signatory to the Geneva Accords, which no one remembers any more, called for expanding the war to include Syria. Only in the last week of the war, as news from the front arrived regarding the state of the soldiers and the rising death toll, did the Zionist Left wake up. It was only after realizing that there would be no military victory and that the ground campaign would result in many casualties that their voices rose in opposition to coincide with the onset of the ground campaign. Peretz’s presence in the Ministry of Defence, as well as the voices of other Labour Party ‘moderates’ and former activists from the Peace Now movement, such as Yuli Tamir, the Minister of Education, provided cover for the war, regionally and internationally. In 1982, those same individuals were shouting at demonstrations that Sharon was a murderer, which was true, except that Sharon had not killed with his bare hands, but had given orders to destroy much less than their government destroyed during those 33 days in 2006.

The election of Peretz as leader of Labour was in itself a sign of the crisis brewing within the party. He won because he seemed to propose a return to the party’s social justice agenda at least, after it had lost its political strategy. Peretz’s oriental origins and unionist activities were emphasized during the election campaign in order to add a social dimension to the party’s message. This came at the heels of the collapse of Barak’s political strategy, the failure of negotiations with Syria, the debacle of the Camp David adventure with the Palestinian National Authority, and Barak’s statements that he had no partner on the Palestinian side, which ushered in Israel’s unilateral policy. Sharon’s formation of Kadima embodied both the demise of the political agenda and negotiations with the Arabs from the Israeli parties’ agenda,
and its replacement with ‘the only game in town’, disengagement and self-imposed isolation from the Arabs.

However, as soon as Peretz became Defence Minister, he caused the Labour Party to fail in its attempt to distinguish itself from Kadima through its socially driven agenda. The cost of the war and its economic fallout will undoubtedly reduce the budgets of various ministries in order to compensate for the damage caused by the war and cover the Army’s expenses. The Labour Party has therefore suffered a dual loss, one at the social and the other at the security level; Peretz is no longer a union activist, nor has he become Alexander the Great in war. Politically, Labour has no new ideas to propose to its constituency, and is as guilty in this respect as Kadima. Perhaps Peretz realized this after the distraction of the war had passed, when he suddenly suggested opening political negotiations with Syria. However, no sooner had he spoken that Olmert put a damper on his move by declaring that Syria was part of the ‘axis of evil’ and, as such, negotiations with it were not permitted by decision of the American administration.

In his response to his Ministers of Defence and Internal Security (the former head of Shabak, Avi Dichter), Olmert reiterated the American position regarding negotiations with Syria, word for word, including asking it to first stop supporting terrorism, and then ‘we shall see’, which is in fact the same attitude that led to the suspension of negotiations with Syria before. Many Israelis believe that from 11 September 2001, when Syria refused to join the acquiescent Arab position regarding America’s invasion of Iraq, and Colin Powel visited Damascus and stated America’s conditions for Syria to alter its policies in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, until today, America bears responsibility for all that has transpired on Israel’s so-called ‘northern front’.

For the first time, Israel saw its immediate interests become simple details in the global empire’s agenda. The United States sees the fight against Hezbollah and Syria as mere stages in the war on terror and on anyone who dares stand against its policies. As for Israel’s immediate interests, such as reaching a ceasefire agreement and concluding an exchange of prisoners, they seem to be small details that Israel should be willing to sacrifice. Readers no doubt remember Bolton’s declaration, in the first few days of the war, which would have seemed strange had we not known its source, when he said, ‘I’d like to know when there’s been an effective ceasefire between a terrorist organization and a state in the past’. This is a war without end, as far as he and those who appointed him to the Security Council are concerned. Even Israel should postpone its quest for security on its borders, and its attempts to prevent Syrian military supplies from reaching Hezbollah, with or without negotiations, because America’s ultimate goal is to force Syria to its knees or launch a strike against it, even if it poses a non-existent threat to Israel, in terms of dead, wounded and damage. America will not allow Israel to collapse, but does expect it to pay the concomitant price.

This might be the first time in the history of the Middle East conflict that Israel, if it ever decided to negotiate with Syria, has first to convince the United States of the need to do that. Bush senior and his Secretary of State, James Baker, had to drag Shamir to Madrid, kicking and screaming. As for Olmert, assuming he ever decides to negotiate with Syria, and so far he has not, he will have first to convince Bush junior, though this writer believes that he has neither the requisite strength nor the wisdom to reach this conclusion.
The situation of Kadima is not much better than that of Labour. First, it is not a real party since it has no ideological platform and has never held a party convention or elected the relevant constitutional committees. It is a group of ambitious and opportunistic politicians from various political parties, who gathered around Sharon for one political purpose only, i.e. disengagement from the Palestinians, rather than with a view to an idea for a solution or a party programme per se. Some of Kadima’s MKs ran after Sharon when they realized that neither Likud nor Labour would endorse their candidacy; others attempted to avoid trials or legal procedures by joining a ruling party, while others yet, including the politically ambitious stars of academia and graduates from the security services, had a desire to win a parliamentary seat for the party in power. The only concrete thing this party has managed to achieve since it came to power is to lose its ‘political programme’ even before holding its party convention. However, if we consider disengagement as a proper political programme, then this summer’s incidents in Gaza and Lebanon have already done away with it. The dissolution of this party is just a matter of time; what keeps it in power is its realization, like Labour’s, that, if opinion polls are to be believed, it will undoubtedly lose any elections to be held this year (2007). It is holding onto power, therefore, for fear of the elections, and no one should take this motive lightly.

Kadima attracted all the votes of the secular right-wing supporters of the Shinui Party, and some of Likud’s and Labour’s votes. It is a secular and hawkish party, with an aggressive stance towards the Palestinians and Arabs, to which the presence of Sharon at the helm, gave a security aura. This aura was lost in this last war, however, when the party failed to rise to the expectations of its secular right-wing base, which places a lot of faith in the army. All the ideology left for the secular right-wing base of this party stands on the ‘sacred’ pillars of the army, privatization of the economy and the relationship with the United States.

It is clear now that the main factors that distinguish this last war are bad management, the lack of preparation and hesitant decision-making. This is what the exalted but badly shaken Israeli democracy is debating at this moment, in contrast with the fundamental issues currently under discussion in Lebanon and the Arab media, such as whether to support or oppose the resistance. In this writer’s opinion, the Israelis are not discussing any fundamental issues right now, but mere technical matters relevant to poor management and bad decision-making. So far, there is neither a genuine nor a significant position against the war in principle, nor against the Israeli policies that led to it in the first place.

The Israelis had become accustomed to believing in the myth that they could wage war without suffering casualties. They therefore blame the government for two contradictory issues: the high number of casualties, and the fact that this toll has prevented it from keeping the war going. They seek to outbid each other in calling for sacrifice and, at the same time, want a war without victims. This is what typical rightwing demagogic wars are like, allowing fascist regimes to exploit their own societies as they claw their way up to the top. Just like the Arabs with their inferiority complex and defeat syndrome, Israel does not want to rid itself of the complex of the 1967 war with its fast victory syndrome, as if it should serve as model for all its wars against the Arabs, and as if any war that does not end within six days warrants a committee of investigation.

What is even worse is that the ‘enlightened’ secular social stratum has started losing its position as the fighting elite. With the exception of the air force and the
continued enrolment of Kibbutz members in military units such as the Golani Brigade, which is no longer the elite force people thought it was, the military is made up of religious soldiers, oriental Jews, Russian emigrants and settlers motivated by ultra nationalist and extremist religious beliefs. These, until recently marginalized, social strata are not marginalized any more, not even in the military. They will lead the protest against the ‘mismanagement’ of the war by the government according to their political convictions and they will not allow the protest to become a peace movement. Although the analysis below cannot be regarded as a strictly scientific study, if we examine the list of Israeli casualties meticulously, including their names and areas of residence, etc., we will find that among the 117 soldiers listed only two are from Tel Aviv (of whom one is a French immigrant). (If enrolment percentages really reflected the demographic composition of the country, the percentage of soldiers from Tel Aviv, the heart of the secular, educated middle class, mostly Ashkenazi, in various fighting units would be in the region of 15%). Statistics also show that the number of Kibbutz and rural village residents (moshavim) who died in the war was relatively high (almost 20%), of whom nine came from West Bank settlements with small populations, three from the extremist settlement of Alei Zahav alone, and fifteen were new immigrants.

There is no sense of victory in Israel, but there is one of failure, which is a gentle code word for defeat. Israelis are sharpening their knives for the upcoming confrontation between members of the ruling coalition, between the latter and the opposition, and between all of them and the army. The only thing that applies to them all is that ‘had they known that this would be the outcome, they would not have gone to war in the first place’. This, in short, characterizes all those who lose a war.

A negotiating track with Syria?

In the immediate aftermath of the war, 70 Israeli personalities addressed an open letter to Olmert asking him to do his best to open negotiations with Syria, and the Palestinian Authority (Hamas), to extricate the country from a crisis that could lead to another war (Yadiot Ahronot, 25 September 2006).

This letter is an initial attempt by certain Israelis who, apart from the extreme right, had given the war their enthusiastic support, to criticize the government and come to terms with the outcome of the war. The letter resembles one that reservist officers sent to Menachem Begin in 1977, in the aftermath of Sadat’s visit to Israel, asking him not to miss the opportunity of peace with Egypt. At that time, signatories to the letter formed a group known as the Reservists Movement, which later became Peace Now. Their letter brought to light three clear though undeclared opinions, widely prevalent among the Israeli public following the 1973 War.

First, the era of Israeli victories, like in the 1967 war, was long gone and Israel’s wars would not be as easy in the future. On the other hand, although it was still possible for Israel to score tactical, though temporary, military successes against the Arabs, it would have to pay a high price to preserve them, and the question remained as to how ready it was to pay the price, as the Arabs improved their level of preparedness. On the Arab side, it meant that they would be able to achieve military victory against Israel, even if this were not a total defeat for Israel, but enough to force it to make concessions.
Second, it was worth giving the entire Sinai Peninsula back to Egypt, the largest Arab country, in return for sidelining it from the conflict.

Third, it would be wrong to miss the opportunity provided by President Sadat’s visit to Israel to conclude a separate peace treaty; it was the only way to do away with the comprehensive notion of an ‘Arab–Israeli conflict’ and replace it by separate negotiating ‘tracks’.

Indeed, none of Israel’s wars, after that of 1973, resembled the Six-Day War, since they all faced powerful resistance groups rather than regular armies. The Six-Day War was the first and last walkover for Israel, although an entire Arab generation refuses to free itself from the clutches of this ‘shameful’ defeat.

One of the first results of Israel’s separate peace treaty with Egypt was the resolve that it would not consider the treaty as a blueprint solution for its other confrontations with the Arabs. Instead, it seized the opportunity which sidelining the largest Arab country had provided to convince itself that it would not have to pay such a high price ever again, since the other fronts were now considerably weaker as the result of this treaty, and therefore incapable of launching a war on it without Egypt. This is the other facet of separate peace treaties—even when Israel’s leadership was ready to pay the price for peace, it was clear that public opinion was not ready to offer enough territorial concessions, nor saw the need for it. The 1982 invasion of Lebanon, which attempted to liquidate the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) by force, was a direct result of the peace treaty with Egypt. Israeli impudence went as far as annexing the Golan Heights, using an opportunistic and provocative law which the Knesset had adopted. It is worth mentioning here that the adoption of this law did not prevent Israel from negotiating later with Syria over a deal to exchange the Golan Heights for peace, so Olmert’s declaration, after this last war, that the Golan Heights would remain part of Israel as long as he was Prime Minister, does not have much significance; he could have said, as easily, ‘as long as Bush is President of the United States’.

The aim for Syria of establishing a strategic balance with Israel was not to regain the Golan Heights through a separate peace treaty. However, when Syria abandoned the strategic balance option, after the collapse of the socialist bloc and the old Arab system, and in the wake of the second Gulf War (the Kuwait War) and the Oslo Agreements, it was obvious to successive Israeli leaders that the price of peace with Syria was the return of all territories occupied in 1967, without negotiations over land. Contrary to what many believed, the Golan Heights were never open to negotiations, neither before, nor after the Oslo Agreements. Negotiations centred round issues such as the timing of the withdrawal, its relevance to bilateral relations, the kind of relations that would exist and disarmament on both sides of the border. Syria never agreed to Rabin’s proposal that there be gradual parity between the depth of Israeli withdrawal and the extent of normalization between the two countries. Nor did Syria adopt Sadat’s dramatic stance, try to win Israeli public opinion over, or impress it with flamboyant ideological shifts in position. Furthermore, Syria was not on the losing side in the Second Gulf War, and its strategic influence had only increased in tandem with the ascending power of the Lebanese resistance, after the Americans and French withdrew from Lebanon after 1984.

However, after Rabin agreed to the restitution of the entire Golan Heights to Syria in return for peace, he chose, under pressure from Shimon Perez’s lobby in the
Labour Party and the proposals he put forward at Oslo, to accept a historical deal that seemed easier on Israel than giving up the Golan Heights. This deal included, among other things, the recognition of Israel by a PLO that was going through a period of weakness. However, when Barak took over from Netanyahu and reverted to that same track in 1999, he reneged on Israel’s commitments at the last moment, and was not fortunate enough this time around to find someone on the Palestinian side ready to compensate his loss; negotiations thus collapsed on all fronts.

It was at this point that the idea of unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, and then Gaza, under pressure from the resistance’s activities, started taking shape. This, however, led eventually to the reoccupation of Gaza, and to the recent outbreak of war in Lebanon. In the meantime, every time Syria reiterates its position, even in response to a question, it is seen as a one-sided overture of peace with Israel, due to the regime’s weakness in the wake of Hafez al-Asad’s death and also, more particularly, after the 11 September attacks. Furthermore, whenever Syria reminds public opinion that it is not calling to restart the negotiations from square one, but rather to pick up where they ended, it is seen as putting preconditions for negotiations.

In the meantime, the American administration had adopted a policy of direct military intervention, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, and transformed the war against terror into a global political and military ideology. It subjected its relations with Syria to the rules of this global war and therefore saw any potential Israeli negotiations with Syria over the Golan Heights, and with Lebanon, as ‘making life easier for Syria’. It wants this to be part of a goodwill gesture conditional upon Syria’s acceptance of America’s terms and policies, in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine. This means that the issue of Israel’s negotiations with Syria is, for the very first time ever, out of Israel’s hands. It also means that the Arab–Israeli conflict will become a conflict between the Palestinians, Lebanese and Syrians, on one hand, and Israel on the other. The aim is to bunch the Syrian and Lebanese issues together and place them in the hands of the State Department, the Pentagon or the White House, under the banner of the ‘war against terror’ in return for keeping a free hand for Israel in the Palestinian issue without any American pressure.

It is possible to compare the open letter sent by 70 Israeli intellectuals and reservist officers to the Israeli government, and declarations of the Minister of Education regarding the need to open contacts with Syria, as the latter said ‘despite America’s interdiction’ (Yadiot Achronot, 25 September 2006) with the open letter to Begin that led to the formation of the Peace Now movement. However, their historical contexts are completely different. When the first letter was written, the conflict between the superpowers compelled America to work at winning Egypt to its side, and the Carter administration put pressure on Israel’s rightwing leaders, as did public opinion, to make them appreciate the importance of peace with Egypt and its potential impact on the geo-strategic map of the region, if not the world. Since then, only the Israeli local context has remained unchanged, meaning that, when this latest letter was sent, certain Israelis were fully aware that the roots of failure in Lebanon went back to the missed opportunity of peace with Syria, in 1999–2000, and that the only solution was to reopen negotiations on that track. Those are the very Israelis who called for victory over the resistance, and the ones who are trying now to set themselves apart within the ruling coalition. If Israel’s rightwing arrived at the conclusion that it should be better prepared for the next war, which Lieberman, Yaalon and Netanyahu have promised to lead it into, then this group’s conclusion is
that Israel should go back to the negotiating table. The difference, however, is that
this time the United States is pushing in the opposite direction, and the Arab attitude
that had opposed separate peace treaties and demanded at Camp David more than
Sadat himself had asked for in his speech to the Knesset, is doing just the opposite. It
is embellishing the situation before Israel’s eyes, and giving the impression that it is
possible to arrive at a settlement, pleasing to the Arabs, which involves less than
what Syria is asking for, especially since the option of war is no longer possible. This
is the same ‘moderate’ Arab attitude that is currently besieging the elected
Palestinian government and trying to impose on it conditions, such as the need to
commit itself to peace initiatives and agreements that Israel itself has rejected, and
the same attitude that sees the resistance’s victory in Lebanon as a defeat for it
personally. This writer believes that, as a result of certain structural similarities between
the outcome of the October 1973 war and the latest Lebanon war, the recent letter’s
signatories have not appreciated the depth of the current Arab transformation.

Nevertheless, this Israeli move will undoubtedly have another impact, in another
context, which will astonish those who rely on the United States, which is the impact
this new awareness will have on the next arena of conflict, i.e. the American political
arena, namely the failure of Bush’s entire foreign policy agenda, within the next two
years, after the entire neo-conservative ideology has been debunked. It is very
important for the American public to hear the opinion of Israeli reservist officers and
writers calling for peace and stability in their own language, i.e. in the language that
the Americans themselves understand, rather than relying on civil wars breaking out
in areas just outside their borders. American public opinion should realize, in its
effort to free itself from the neoconservative foreign affairs ideology, that any
attempt to reorganize the region to fit Israel’s needs, i.e. a scenario where countries
in the region are subdivided into small entities, where Arabs are not recognized as a
nation, while Israel should be recognized as a nation, is a very risky proposition. It
should realize that it would eventually have no choice but to open a dialogue with
Arab ‘extremists’, the very enemies of their ‘moderate’ Arab friends, and their own
policies. Once free from their present leaders, the American and Israeli public should
also free themselves from the advice of their Arab friends.

Once free from neo-conservative policy disasters, from Blair and the current
American administration, and given Israeli statements such as those that followed
the October 1973 war, and elections in Spain and Italy that went against military
intervention in Iraq, Arab connivance with the United States and Israel will become
an obstacle, even to Israeli initiatives such as this one. Arab attempts to tighten the
noose round the neck of the resistance in Palestine and Lebanon, and open doors for
new initiatives that would settle for less than full Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese
rights would not affect the Israeli government’s decisions, in any way.

Dispelling clarity
It was not by pure coincidence that, straight after the war on Lebanon, Olmert,
‘cancelled,’ or ‘suspended’, plans to disengage from the West Bank. These plans, in
short, are nothing but an Israeli unilateral delineation of borders that annexes
Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank to Israel, once withdrawal is complete,
without the benefit of an agreement over the remaining territories. Although this
plan does not deserve the title of ‘political agenda’, it was the only plan on the table
regarding the Palestinians track. Why is it not a coincidence? Because in the Israelis’ minds, withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 was a one-sided move that marked the beginning of a unilateral alternative to the notion of bilateral settlements in the aftermath of the failure of negotiations with Syria. In the Arab mind, however, this withdrawal was as good as liberation. For Israel, the withdrawal from Lebanon took place without the benefit of a settlement, or a peace agreement, when it could as easily have come as part of a settlement with Syria that included the Golan Heights. Seen from this angle, Barak, rather than Sharon, seems the most likely godfather of unilateral withdrawals.

The notion of disengagement and unilateral withdrawal from Gaza was soon mentioned after the failure of Barak’s negotiations with the Palestinian Authority at Camp David. It was also an attempt, on Barak’s part, to pre-empt any new initiatives, like the Arab Peace Initiative, and even the Road Map, which Sharon’s Israel tried to avoid by the implementation of the disengagement from Gaza.

After withdrawing from Sinai as a price for sidelining the largest Arab country, Israel’s typical attitude at the negotiations was simply: if any Arab partner in these separate negotiations rejects Israel’s settlement conditions or the extent to which it is prepared to withdraw from territories occupied in 1967, it will conclude that it has no partner, rather than no agreement. In the absence of a partner, Israel will unilaterally impose whatever it sees fit, keeping territories under its control and withdrawing from areas that constitute a source of nuisance for it, such as south Lebanon and Gaza, where resistance, poor living conditions and various demographic problems are rife. It will withdraw without a settlement, or peace agreement, and leave the nuisance to those that are no longer its partners to grapple with. Given that there is no peace agreement, Israel will leave behind a host of problems, such as keeping part of territories it disengages from under its control, putting their population in ghettos or prisons built for that purpose, limiting their right of movement to and from these areas, and reoccupying or making incursions, at will. In other words, it reserves the right to do whatever it pleases.

From the Israeli point of view, unilateral disengagement and the one-sided dictation of terms have failed in Gaza and Lebanon, despite the differences between them from the Arab perspective. This failure was evidenced by the increasing power and ability of the resistance, the success of Hamas in the elections and, ultimately, by Israel’s debacle in the last war on Lebanon, thanks to the courage of the Lebanese resistance.

Given that Olmert’s government can ill afford another battle of wills with the Israeli Right over a withdrawal, no matter how limited, from the West Bank, especially in the shadow of the heated internal debate over failures in the war, we can understand why the ‘withdrawal’, or unilateral disengagement from the West Bank, was cancelled. Earlier, Barak cancelled the Oslo Agreement that Rabin had signed in Camp David, and the ‘Wye Plantation’ Agreement with Netanyahu, and adopted the notion of unilateral disengagement, which effectively nullified everything else. Barak announced at the time that he would neither adhere to partial withdrawals, nor to the release of Palestinian prisoners, stipulated in various agreements, and that he would instead insist on reaching a final solution at Camp David on Israeli terms. Camp David failed, however, and other agreements remained suspended until the idea of unilateral withdrawal appeared on the scene and effectively rendered Camp David null and void. What is strange in the matter is that the international community, and the so-called ‘moderate Arab front’, are asking the elected Palestinian government to recognize the Oslo Accords and the Arab peace initiative,
which is one of the Quartet’s conditions, even though both the Sharon and Barak
governments have already rejected it.

Disengagement, therefore, has failed, as did partial solutions of the Oslo kind. What else has become clear after the Lebanon war? What has become clear is that policies based on power alone have also failed. Israel ventured into an American war on Lebanon, a war in which its interest lay in regaining the military deterrence on which its power-based policies rely, and will continue to rely as long as the Arabs do not accept its conditions. The result, however, was that its aura of deterrence was more damaged than before.

There is no dispute in Israel that the country has lost the war in Lebanon, and the ongoing debates centre only round the reasons for this failure, and on who is to blame. The debate over the war’s outcome, and the reason behind it, is but a continuation of the war by other means. The question here, however, is why do Israelis from the extreme Right to the extreme Left agree that the war was a failure, while the Arabs are still arguing whether it was a success or a failure for them. No doubt, there is an attempt on the part of certain Arabs to prevent the resistance from reaping the fruits of its victory, and this sort of attitude is neither interested in facts, nor influenced by reason.

The notion of power-based policies, which Israel tried to rehabilitate by restoring its deterrence aura, has failed, as did the notions of partial solutions and unilateral disengagement. What remains now that the war on Lebanon is over and done with? Two possible options remain: either a comprehensive, just and permanent peace solution, which Israel has already rejected, or stagnation and a political and diplomatic void, which would eventually lead to further deterioration and another all-out war. It could also possibly mean, at this historic point in time, the adoption of a strategy of resistance on all fronts. This clarity of options in the aftermath of the war on Lebanon is where Israel’s strategic dilemma lies.

To deepen this dilemma further, the Arabs should hold on to their peace initiative for a just and durable peace, without budging an inch, for the ball is currently in the Israeli court. The attractiveness of the resistance option puts the United States and its allies in a dilemma; it is David’s success, after all, that causes Saul’s dilemma. This is why America’s allies come up with new initiatives and amendments, in a bid to give Israel, and others, a way out of their dilemma; they engage in diplomatic shenanigans devoid of any meaning, empty dialogues and regular visits that create illusion and false expectations. Clarity thus dissipates and illusion remains. The Arabs launched their peace initiative at an inopportune time, straight after 11 September, and from a position of weakness. This made it seem as if it was simply meant to prove the Arabs’ desire for peace and improve their image, and the image of Saudi Arabia, upon America’s advice, at a time when the Kingdom was the object of intense and large-scale incitement in the United States. This was blackmail of sorts, which explains why the initiative marked the beginning of a deterioration in the situation, and of a further round of concessions, following the first Arab visits to Washington in the wake of 11 September, until the initiative became a mere footnote in a margin of the Road Map. Instead of restating the facts, holding even faster to their initiative and clarifying the issues to prevent Israel, which failed to respond positively to it, from escaping once again, the Arabs once more started spreading new illusions as soon as the Lebanon war ended.

There is, on the regional political scene, one of those machines that produce artificial fog, similar to those used in the cinema business when foggy and rainy
conditions are called for on a clear and sunny day. This machine’s job is solely to turn the Palestinian issue into a matter of public relations. Blair visited Palestine after the war in Iraq, and then again after the war on Lebanon, and from Cairo Rice spoke about assisting the Palestinian President in forming a government that would reverse the results of the democratic elections and accept the Quartet’s conditions. As usual, as soon as a war is over the season of political industry round the Palestinian issue begins, and then quickly stops until the next crisis erupts. These movements are, basically, public relations visits which aim to burnish one way or another, like a disinfectant, the image of the aggressor, and establish another coalition to either impose an embargo, or launch another war the Arabs would find it difficult to take part in, without real ‘movement’ on the Palestinian track. The public relations industry is content now with ‘sustaining’ or ‘moving’ the ‘process’ rather than with finding a real solution — after all, movement is always better than stagnation and what is important is to keep the peace process ticking.

The United States advised Israel to make ‘good-will gestures’ towards the Palestinian presidency. Do we ever hear terms like that used in conjunction with other regions of the world? Gestures, such as Olmert’s agreement to meet with the Palestinian president, and the release of a number of detainees, are enough, at this stage, for the Arabs to muster the strength to keep playing their part in the siege around the elected Palestinian government. The Arabs have volunteered or willingly offered their cooperation in maintaining this embargo, without the benefit of an international resolution to that effect.

Instead of giving Israel clear options to choose from, the elected and besieged Palestinian government has to choose between recognizing Israel and the agreements that the latter itself no longer honours, or seeing the embargo against it remain in place. Thus, instead of an Israeli dilemma, we now have an artificially created Palestinian dilemma.

Arab policies and the Palestinian cause’s public relations industry are extricating Israel from a historical dilemma. It is a dilemma because, although Israel is pondering the option of total war versus total peace, it will not necessarily opt for war. Experience in the region has shown that going to war in order to break down the established Arab order only generates more and increasingly dangerous enemies for America and Israel’s strategy in the region. The difference is that the other enemies do not have better alternatives to offer their societies, while national resistance movements, such as Hezbollah, Hamas and their allies, can, if they want to, offer alternatives. Hamas is currently trying, and could succeed if it tries hard enough, to present social and political alternatives, beyond resistance and rejection, that embrace coexistence among a variety of movements that are committed to national sovereignty, but reject foreign intervention.

Israel has a choice to make and there has not been a time when it had as few political ideas of its own as it has now. This state is without political plans of any kind to help it confront the fateful issues that face it. So far, Israel’s leaders have never been compelled to give their citizens the choice between a just and durable peace and a permanent state of war. If they do that, one day, they will be surprised at the number of those who will opt for peace and for paying the concomitant price. Unfortunately, however, on one hand, the required historic leadership does not exist in Israel and, on the other, many are those in the Arab world who are digging furiously in all directions to give Israel a way out of having to make that choice. It
will therefore, once again avoid facing the facts, made all the more evident by the war on Lebanon, by denying the outcome and resorting to diplomatic posturing to revive moribund ideas.

Notes
1. As is already known the Americans denied Olmert’s claims that the Israeli extended ground offensive at the end of the war improved the 1701 resolution to Israel’s benefit (Bolton 2008).
2. One should notice that when the issue of prisoners came up, we arrived at the issue of prisoner exchange despite everything! This reminds us of the extent of the hullabaloo that made the prisoner exchange issue a reason to go to war. In the Haaretz article, which revolves around the decision to go to war, a foreign ministry source said that liberation of the prisoners issue did not play a role in the decision to go to war.
3. This article was by Etan Haber, in which he laments that this elite is no longer there and complains about the structure of the Israeli army, and the standard of the people and the popular culture (Haber 2006).
4. Zeef Schiff (Haaretz) says in a discussion with his colleague, Yael Marcus, who wrote an article the day before in that same paper (26 July) that the army must win though it turned out to be a rich and stupid army. Schiff states that the Israeli army has no choice but to win against Hezbollah. He goes on to say that although Israel did not choose this war, now that it was there, it had reached a strategic crossroad. Schiff believes that peace with Jordan and Egypt would be harmed, and that no one would want to sign a peace agreement with Israel in the future, if it did not defeat Hezbollah in the war. This is another dimension of Israel’s defense theory.
5. These points, such as the changes in Israel’s social structure and their impact on its military theory, are addressed in more detail in Bishara 2005.
6. This is according to both Amir Peretz who stated as much (15 August 2006), and to Olmert on his tour in the North of the country (21 August 2006). Since Sharon, and more precisely, since there has been a direct American military presence in Iraq, and the beginning of the ‘war on terror’, Washington has taken the Syrian file, in its Arab and Lebanese aspects, away from Israel and Sharon, who understands that and has not become involved in any negotiations with Syria at all. His was the only term under which the Israeli government did not get involved in negotiations with Syria.

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