The Israeli war on Lebanon: the Arab dimension

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The article offers a comprehensive review of Arab attitudes toward the war, distinguishing between official Arab positions, initially hostile towards and critical of Hezbollah, and Arab public opinion. The latter endorsed the resistance enthusiastically and was vindicated by Hezbollah’s strong performance on the battlefield, to the embarrassment of Arab governments. The article also addresses the various repercussions on official Arab positions, the Arab public, Iraq, Arab national security, and the future of the Arab–Israeli conflict.

Keywords: Israel; Lebanon; war of 2006; the Arab dimension; Hezbollah; future of Arab-Israeli conflict

Introduction

The Israeli aggression on Lebanon, in July-August 2006, and Hezbollah’s resistance to it represent a turning point in the saga of the Arab–Israeli conflict for reasons that are clear to all. The least that can be said is that Hezbollah’s resistance to the aggression, the losses it inflicted on the enemy and, most important of all, its preparedness, vision, political strategy and impressive military performance on the battlefield, highlighted in an unprecedented manner the validity of resistance as a viable option. This option is, furthermore, in direct contrast to the ‘only viable strategic option’ that Arab regimes have followed so far.

An article dedicated to the war’s repercussions on the Arab world must address the following issues:

- repercussions on the official Arab political establishment (i.e. the Arab regimes);
- repercussions on the Arab public;
- repercussions on Iraq;
- repercussions on Arab national security;
- repercussions on the future of the Arab–Israeli conflict;
- repercussions on the Arab regional order, including the Arab League, Arab summit meetings, inter-Arab relations, Arab regional organization and joint Arab treaties, such as the Joint Arab Defence and Economic Cooperation Treaty.

The article will address these topics in order of priority, according to the estimation of the author. Two difficulties were faced in the writing of the article. First, there was insufficient time due to the fact that the seminar at which the paper was first presented had to take place speedily, when it could have most impact on an unstable situation. Although the lack of time made it impossible to include the breadth of...
available data, the author has tried to develop a proper analytical framework for the subject. The second difficulty stems from the fact that the outcome of the conflict, whose repercussions the seminar sets out to analyse, is not yet entirely clear. This means that ideas put forward here will remain the objects of extensive debate and political quarrel until a shared vision of the future ultimately develops. The present seminar could undoubtedly contribute much to that effort. On the methodological level, the repercussions of the Israeli attack for Lebanon, and for the Arabs in general, depend mainly on the attitude of Arab regimes towards it. There is a fundamental difference between an Arab regime that supports the resistance and another that shows indifference or harbours animosity towards it. In the former case, victory by the resistance serves as a consolidating factor for that regime, and in the latter, it only serves to undermine it. This article is therefore divided into two main parts. The first deals with Arab attitudes towards the war, and the second deals with its repercussions on the Arab system.

**Arab attitudes towards the war**

One cannot consider Arab positions vis-à-vis the Israeli attack on Lebanon without looking at the Arabs’ general situation on the eve of the war. Despite all the talk about the setbacks that had afflicted the Arab political establishment since 1967, it might be said that the American occupation of Iraq in 2003, and Arab attitudes towards it, marked an all-time low. Indeed, while the Arab system objected initially to American threats towards Iraq, as demonstrated at the Sharm al-Shaykh Summit in March 2003, and the preceding and following Arab Ministerial Council meetings that coincided with the invasion itself, the situation changed drastically when American forces entered Baghdad and overthrew the regime on 9 April 2003. In the immediate aftermath, it seemed that the Arab political establishment was reassessing its options in order to ‘adapt’ and accept the new status quo. There were no calls for an emergency Arab summit conference, although the protocol relevant to the holding of regular summit meetings, approved at the 2000 Summit in Cairo, sanctions the convening of such conferences if Arab national security comes under threat. The Arab system has convened several such meetings in the past for matters far less serious than the occupation of an Arab country of the stature and significance of Iraq. More ominous yet is the fact that these same Arab leaders held a summit at Sharm al-Shaykh in June 2003, with the president of the state that occupied Iraq, and gave their blessing to Security Council Resolution 1483. This resolution is what gave legitimacy to the American occupation of Iraq, when it failed to obtain the Security Council’s permission to launch a military attack on that country.

The most dangerous development, however, was the recognition, at the first ministerial-level meeting of the Arab League after the occupation of Iraq (in September 2003), of the representative of the Iraqi Transitional Authority, which was established by the American administrator, as the legitimate representative of the state of Iraq to the Arab League. What is so dangerous in this move is that it constitutes a precedent in the history of the League for a representative of an Arab state, even though appointed by an occupying administration, being acceptable to his peers. This development has also made it impossible for the Arab League to adopt a resolution in support of the resistance to the occupation, or to express
sympathy with it. It was impossible for the League to recognize an administration and, at the same time, support those fighting against it (Ahmad 2004, pp. 334–339).

This short preamble to how things stood at the level of the Arab system on the eve of the Israeli attack on Lebanon, using the narrow viewpoint of the Arab attitude towards the occupation of Iraq, may remind those surprised at the Arab stand against the Lebanese resistance and its activities that the situation was not without precedent. This has been the typical attitude of the Arab system, at least since April 2003, although we can all recall its reserved attitude regarding the resistance in Palestine, even though it is less blatant, especially since Hamas won a landslide victory in the February 2006 general elections.

It is important to underline that, though the above analysis may describe the Arab political system, the unofficial Arab position, whether on the Arab street or at the level of local civil society, or as made manifest through public opinion, is quite different. Nevertheless, although it is quite distinct and has shown a strong tendency to differentiate itself from the official stance, the unofficial Arab position remains very weak and incapable of influencing state policy. Moreover, and despite a certain degree of political activism, it seems that Arab public expression is still in the process of maturing, is vulnerable to pressure and external interventions, and lacks unity and coordination on the interstate level.

With this background, it becomes easy for us to understand the official Arab position regarding the Israeli attack on Lebanon, which this article analyses.

**The ‘initiative’ to oppose the resistance**

Irrespective of the minor details, the first important Arab initiative regarding the events in question came through a statement by the Saudi News Agency on 13 July 2006, attributed to a Saudi official source. The statement emphasized the Kingdom’s support for the right to resistance against occupation, evidenced by its long-standing support for the legitimate Palestinian resistance against ‘military’ occupation and for sparing innocent lives, and a similar stand in support of the Lebanese resistance until the occupation of southern Lebanon ‘comes to an end’. The statement goes on to say clearly that the Kingdom believes that ‘there should be a distinction between legitimate resistance and miscalculated adventures by elements from within the state, and acting behind its back, without the prior approval of legal authorities, and without any consultation or coordination with Arab states’. It adds,

Such acts create an extremely dangerous situation that brings death and destruction on all the Arab countries, and their achievements, without giving them any say in the matter. The Kingdom sees that it is time for those elements to shoulder full responsibility for this adventurous behaviour, and that the burden of ending the crisis they have created, falls on them alone. (Al-Ḥāyāt, 15 July 2006, p. 4).

The next day, a joint Egyptian–Jordanian statement was released in Cairo after talks between the Egyptian President and the King of Jordan, condemning ‘large-scale Israeli military operations in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories’, and calling for ‘an immediate end to attacks against civilians and the targeting of Lebanese and Palestinian infrastructures and vital installations’. The statement stressed the ‘need to arrive at a settlement of the dangerous current situation, on both the Lebanese and Palestinian fronts, to allow for the release of prisoners as a means of putting an end to the tragic circumstances.’ However, it warned against ‘the danger of the
region slipping towards adventures that do not serve Arab causes and interests’ and ‘dragging the region into a state of war that would hamper chances for peace and pave the way towards a new round of violence and tensions of unknown duration and repercussions’. The statement emphasized

the need for all parties in the region to exercise maximum self-restraint, display a high degree of responsibility and refrain from undertaking irresponsible escalatory actions that could drag the region into a precarious situation and involve it in unpredictable confrontations which repercussions would be borne by all states and people of the region. (Al-Ḥayāt, 15 July 2006, p. 4; Al-ʾAhrām, 15 July 2006, p. 9)

Although the language of the Egyptian–Jordanian statement is clearly less explicit and more balanced than the Saudi, the core remained, according to analysts and observers, in line with the Saudi position not to mention the obviously coordinated time-sequence. This means there were influential forces within the Arab system that had reservations regarding Hezbollah’s actions, did not agree with it, and held it alone responsible both for the war’s repercussions and for putting an end to the ensuing dangerous situation.

It is interesting to observe the evolution of the official Arab position towards the issue of resistance against occupation; this exercise brings to the surface important landmarks in the development of this position. There was a time, starting in October 1963, when Arab officials supported armed resistance against occupation, such as Egypt’s support for the Algerian revolution of November 1954 against French colonialism, and its support for the revolution in Southern Yemen against British occupation. We should also not forget how the Arab League embraced the creation of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, and the Liberation Army in 1964.

However, the situation in the Arab world soon changed course to become part and parcel of a global movement. Genuine support for armed struggle became a superficial exercise in word only, content with issuing general expressions of sympathy and, at best, offering financial assistance that could be turned on and off. Arab officialdom then desisted from their preferred habit of using empty political rhetoric, and there were no more words, either good or bad, directed at the resistance in Lebanon, Palestine or Iraq. Earlier, Arab officialdom was keen to distinguish between the legitimate right to resist, and objectionable terrorism, a distinction that was to the resistance’s advantage, by any measure, since it meant that not all resistance was terrorism. On the other hand, this put pressure on the resistance, since it was required to refrain from any activities that ‘could be misconstrued as terrorism’. Today, the regimes draw a distinction between legitimate resistance, and ‘miscalculated adventures’, in the sense that a well-calculated move is necessarily one that is sanctioned by official authorities, in consultation and coordination with other Arab states. It follows, therefore, that without that, an extremely dangerous situation would ensue and put all the Arab states that had no say in the matter, and their achievements, under threat.

It is important to look closely at this logic, which also undoubtedly proposes a new way of managing the Arab–Israeli conflict. At first glance, the concept of ‘liberation’ appears in its nature to contradict common sense, for if every freedom fighter took into consideration the balance of power between himself and the occupier, and the expected reaction to his impending actions, there would be no wars of liberation anywhere in the world. What well-placed calculation would allow Fateh, Hamas or Hezbollah to fight Israel? The astonishing fact is that all liberation
movements launched upon a miscalculation of the balance of power have been successful. At the same time, although it is true that a population that has a resistance movement fighting for its rights pays a very high price to confront the occupation, victory will undoubtedly be theirs in the end; and more important yet, victory will not come without this high price.

In the final analysis, we are required to arrive at the conclusion that, in the view of the Arab political establishment, the resistance should have appealed to the authorities and consulted the Arab states before doing what it did. There is, however, not a single example in history of a resistance movement actually doing that. Moreover, had it done so, the authorities would not have allowed it. It might be said that the situation in Lebanon is different because the state, generally speaking, does not harbour enmity towards the resistance, and because, in addition to being a fighting force, Hezbollah has its own bloc in Parliament and is part of the Cabinet. Nevertheless, no one expects the state to sanction what Hezbollah did because, if anything, it would then bear official responsibility for Hezbollah’s actions, and thus provide a legitimate excuse for Israel’s aggression.

The requirement to consult and coordinate with the Arab states is the strangest aspect of this proposition. The nationalistic character of the battle against Israel ended in the aftermath of the 1973 October War. Since then, no one has lent support to any resistance movement. On the other hand, resistance movements no longer appeal to their neighbours for support. Why, then, all the talk now about national management of the conflict, which would have involved only ‘calculated’ advice for moderation and for refraining from such acts? Besides, if there are fears that the current state of affairs will bring destruction upon the Arab states and their achievements, they need not worry since nothing negative is likely to happen as long as they maintain their current positions.

A final important point in this context concerns the question of ‘good calculation’ and ‘miscalculation’. In fact, a ‘miscalculation’ only becomes evident when a ‘well calculated’ move fails to achieve results. Let it be clear to all those concerned in the Arab world, be they governors or governed, that the logic of ‘calculation’ in dealing with the Arab–Israeli conflict and other major Arab issues has so far failed to achieve success. Did the Arabs not agree a quarter of a century ago on the 1982 Fez Initiative in a demonstration of great flexibility towards Israel? They simply asked for the minimum possible and expressed their readiness to accept the United Nations’ guarantees for peace between the two parties. Has anything been achieved since? Have they not accepted even less than they did at Fez, and offered more to Israel, later at the 2002 Arab summit in Beirut—i.e. normalization between the Arab states and Israel, as soon as the latter accepted the Arab demands tabled at the 2002 Beirut Summit, in return for the Security Council’s peace guarantees of the 1982 Fez Initiative? Four years have passed since the Beirut initiative was tabled, and one wonders if anything has been achieved since. Is a quarter of a century not enough to prove that there is only one way only to deal with the Arab–Israeli conflict? The entire history of our conflict with Israel points towards that conclusion.

It has become clear that, on the basis of an interpretation of these Arab official positions, two different propositions should be considered simultaneously. The first is that the Arab states which have adopted these positions are those closest to American policies, even if, from time to time, they are minor differences of opinion
between them regarding one issue or another. The second concerns the personal fears of each of these states, fear of the resistance in the case of the two countries that have signed peace treaties with Israel, and fear of Iran’s influence in the case of Saudi Arabia. Egypt was obsessed with the fear of being dragged into the conflict following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon—needlessly, however, since no one asked Cairo to contemplate anything of the sort. It would in any case be illogical, given that the Lebanese regular army itself did not take part in the conflict. Egyptian official political circles rose in defence of ‘barring the Egyptian army from taking part in the war’ (Al-Ahrām, several issues in July 2006), sometimes under the pretext that its duty was to defend Egypt and sometimes because the Arab Joint Defence Treaty did not require it to do so. It is interesting to note that this was not at all an issue when Egypt’s participation in the international coalition to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait was a consideration. Egyptian officials were sensitive to the issue of intervening militarily, although they were never asked (either by public opinion or opposition groups) to do so. They were only asked to adopt a tougher diplomatic position against Israel without reaching a point that would violate their international obligations according to the peace treaty with Israel. In the case of Saudi Arabia, fear of Iran was evident in comments by a number of political analysts, and within semi-official circles, as was fear of sectarianism, evidenced by a Saudi cleric’s religious fatwa against Hezbollah. This fatwa was later condemned by several religious sources, but mostly by Saudi clerics and the Muslim public in general.

Naturally, not all Arab positions were in line with those of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan; Syria supported the resistance from the beginning, and blamed Israel for the military escalation. Some Syrian circles condemned those who blamed Hezbollah without paying due attention to the fact that it was Israel that had attacked, and on 14 July 2006 the Baath Party’s Regional Command reaffirmed ‘Syria’s strong and steadfast support for the resistance’. On 17 July 2006, the Syrian Minister of Information stated that any Israeli aggression against Syria would provoke a direct response, unrestricted in duration or method, and Syrian newspapers strongly condemned the silence of the Arab states regarding Israel’s military operations in Lebanon (Al-Ḥayāt, 16 July 2006, p. 4; Al-Ahrām, 17 July 2006, p. 6).

The Ministerial Council of the Arab League and the policy dilemma

Given these different Arab positions, it was obvious that the Ministerial Council of the Arab League would face a real dilemma. Indeed, the Ministerial Council’s meeting, held at the League’s headquarters in Cairo on 15 July 2006, witnessed clear divisions regarding the degree to which Hezbollah could be held responsible for the recent escalation. Diplomatic sources indicated that the ministers fell into three main groups. The first included Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, the Palestinian Authority (or rather the Palestinian presidency), the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and believed that Hezbollah’s actions were ‘irresponsible’ and ‘untimely’. The group was also of the opinion that Hezbollah should have ‘coordinated its actions with the Lebanese authorities which should not have been the last to know, especially since the actions of the former could drag the region into an all-out war.’

The second group, which included Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, believed that Hezbollah’s actions against Israel were legitimate, did not violate the UN Charter and were well within the framework of international resolutions that give occupied peoples the right to mount an armed struggle for liberation.
The third group, which included Morocco, Sudan and Libya, was of the opinion that, although Hezbollah had not committed a crime by kidnapping the two Israeli soldiers, it should have coordinated its activities with the Lebanese government to avoid embarrassing the latter before the international community.

Of particular note was the embarrassment caused to the first group by the Lebanese Foreign Minister who said that, ‘by its daring, humanitarian and selfless public service, the resistance had saved the Arabs from their current state of affairs, liberated Lebanon and restored Arab pride and the spirit of Arabism’ (Al-Hayāt, 16 July 2006). He added that the resistance’s only aim was to liberate Lebanese territory still under occupation, release Lebanese prisoners held in Israeli prisons for over 26 years and liberate the Shebaa Farms.

In the event, the ‘compromise’ reached by the Arab foreign ministers seemed tilted towards the view of the first group, although it was touted as a ‘compromise formula’ aimed at avoiding Arab division over the situations in Lebanon and Palestine. In an implicit reference to Hezbollah and Hamas, Arab ministers warned that many actions ‘by parties keen to preserve Arab interests are instead harmful to those interests’. They added that actions such as these, ‘give Israel, and other forces, inside and outside the Arab world, the opportunity to threaten the security of Arab countries, as is happening right now in Lebanon’ (Al-Hayāt, 16 July 2006).

Although the compromise reached by Arab foreign ministers seemed biased in favour of the first group, the meeting’s final statement declared that the Middle East peace process had failed and that, if this continued to be the case, the failure would ‘lead to further problems in Palestine, Lebanon and perhaps even other countries’. Neither was this bias in favour of one of the Arab positions mitigated by the Arab Ministers’ assertion that ‘Israel should not be given the chance to destroy the infrastructure of Lebanon, Palestine, or any other Arab country’ (Al-Hayāt, 16 July 2006, pp. 1, 5). It was clear that the Arab Ministers had decided, as some of them said openly after the meeting, not to ‘be driven by public emotions and feelings’, since this would ‘not stop the destruction of Lebanon’s infrastructure, nor resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict’ (Al-Hayāt, 16 July 2006).

The resistance, however, stood firm and became a model that galvanized Arab public opinion. In the meantime, Israel escalated its attacks, while condemnations of the official Arab position grew in Lebanon and in much of the Arab independent media. Furthermore, adding to the Arab officialdom’s embarrassment, certain international reactions proved more supportive towards the resistance than the Arabs’. Therefore, given the circumstances, unless they wanted to bring about their own destruction, they had no choice but to modify their positions. The eventual Saudi call for an Arab ministerial emergency meeting to be held in Beirut on 7 August 2006, or almost one month after the onset the Israeli attack, is a case in point.

Holding the ministerial meeting undoubtedly had positive connotations, for irrespective of what preceded it, the fact that it took place in Beirut was of particular significance. It demonstrated the participants’ resolve to throw their weight behind Lebanon, bolstered by a national consensus in Lebanon, and to support the Prime Minister’s plan (Siniora 2006). Absent from the ministers’ tone was the challenge to the resistance, and the meeting culminated in the rare phenomenon of a statement that went beyond mere words. A Tripartite Committee, formed during the meeting, flew directly to New York to give the Arab point of view to those involved in
drafting the US–French sponsored resolution on Lebanon. The adoption of a common decision, followed by steps to see it implemented, is a precedent in the annals of the Arab League, which more often than not, has lacked the clout and the ability to see its decisions put into practice, let alone adhered to. The Tripartite Committee held wide-ranging consultations and took part in the Security Council’s debates, with the result that the final text of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 was a marked improvement on the earlier draft. (For the agenda of the Rome Conference, see: Al-Watan, 8 August 2006, p. 12; Al-Raya, 8 August 2006: p. 13; Al-Hayat, 8 August 2006, p. 3).

Of course, one cannot determine the exact amount of influence Arab diplomacy had in this domain, though it is evident that it did play a role. Of more significance is probably the fact that the Arabs, as a group, stood behind Lebanon and acted as one. However, it should not be forgotten that the main credit should go to the resistance and its performance on the battlefield. For the first time in the history of its conflict with the Arabs, Israel was forced to seek an international resolution to relieve its military burden, after failing for an entire month to achieve its objectives from the war. Last, but not least, Arab diplomacy, and its Lebanese counterpart, took a firm stand vis-à-vis UN Security Council Resolution 1701, although the resolution should not be credited with undue merit, since it is unbalanced and unjust, and the present author has certain reservations regarding some of its provisions. Official Arab circles that participated in the Security Council discussions however, went ahead and accepted it, in general, to avoid further bloodshed.

The perplexed Arab summit

At the beginning of the war, Yemen called for an emergency summit meeting based on the protocol that allows the convening of such meetings when Arab national security is under threat, on condition that two thirds of the members agree. However, the Arab states, seeming not to be concerned about supporting the Lebanese resistance, did not see the need for a summit, and Yemen had to withdraw its invitation because the necessary quorum was lacking and to ‘prevent divisions within Arab ranks’ (Qurbt 2006, p. 9). Moreover, the Arabs unanimously boycotted the Islamic summit, held in Malaysia on 3 August 2006 to discuss the Israeli attack on Lebanon.

One cannot avoid the impression that Arab summits fail to take place when they are most needed. Indeed, as mentioned above, the occupation of Iraq in 2003 did not warrant an emergency summit meeting, and if we go back in time, we also find that the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, during which Beirut put up a historic resistance for three whole months, seems not to have moved the Arabs into convening one. What is more surprising is the fact that the Arab summit of September 1982 produced a peace initiative with Israel (the Fez Initiative) that offered more Arab concessions than were already on the table. More surprising still, is the fact that the resolution on Lebanon fell well short of what was required, since it proposed a ‘comprehensive’ Arab strategy aimed at preventing Israel from launching further attacks, and a vision regarding the means to confront such an attack if it ever took place. The means of implementing this strategy, however, entailed nothing beyond the exertion of general, rather than specific, political, diplomatic and economic pressure and a small committee made up of state representatives embarked
immediately, in co-operation with the Secretary General, on developing this strategy with a view to submitting it to the Council of the Arab League at the next regular session. Needless to say, the strategy never materialized (for the text of the Fez Initiative, see League of Arab States 1987, pp. 169–171).

Within the context of a review of its official position regarding the recent Israeli attack on Lebanon, the Arab system came up with the idea of holding an emergency summit, and rumour has it that it was Saudi Arabia that raised the matter. It would be more accurate to say, however, that the Saudis wanted to dispel suspicions that they were obstructing such a meeting. This became clear from the Saudi Foreign Minister’s speech at the Ministerial Council’s extraordinary session in Beirut, in which he said: ‘Hints and statements to the effect that the Kingdom is against the holding of an emergency summit to deal with the situation in Lebanon, are entirely unfounded.’ He also said that his government had asked him to declare its readiness not only to take part in such a summit, but also to host it in Mecca, on a date agreeable to the Arab brethren; and that the Kingdom’s only condition was that the summit should be well prepared for (Al-Hayat, 15 July 2006, p. 3). Although the Arab League’s Ministerial Council charged the Secretary General of the League to hold consultations in this regard, the adoption of Resolution 1701 took the wind out of the invitation’s sails, notwithstanding the condition that it be ‘well prepared for’. In its emergency meeting, held at the League’s headquarters in Cairo on 20 August 2006, the Arab League’s Ministerial Council effectively put an end to the idea of the emergency summit, or rather postponed it indefinitely, by deciding to hold further consultations in order to ‘prepare well for it’ (Al-Hayat, 21 August 2006, p. 3). Many blamed this on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s speech, of 15 August 2006, in which he harshly condemned Arab officialdom’s position regarding the war (see the full text of the speech in Al-Hayat, 16 August 2006, pp. 8–9). This is, however, an overly superficial interpretation, considering the structural flimsiness of Arab summitry, though the speech was bound to have a certain impact on the chances of holding the summit, perhaps more by way of being the last nail in its coffin.

**Balance-sheet of the Arab popular position**

Despite the official stance of moderate Arab states, which denied the resistance an Arab sanction, Hezbollah’s operation ‘True Promise’ (the name given to the operation by Hassan Nasrallah), its steadfast resistance in the face of the repercussions caused by its action, and its leadership’s clever management of the military, political and media aspects of the battle, most probably had an unprecedented impact on Arab public opinion, and civil society institutions. The battle unveiled a deep-seated sense of defeat among the Arab people, who found in Hezbollah’s performance against Israel’s attack a soothing balm for their wound, not only in relation to the Arab–Israeli conflict, but also in relation to America’s hegemony on the region. It also unveiled a certain Arab popular need for an exemplary leadership model at a time when the nation’s honour and integrity were in decline. This explains the mass demonstrations that took place throughout the Arab world, and why the battle and its progress became everyone’s topic of conversation. They were all looking for a way to support the resistance, and the striking initiatives taken by various parties in this domain helped mitigate the impact of the unjust siege
of Lebanon. The Arab masses dealt a fatal blow to those who were betting on the outbreak of sectarian strife by elevating the Shi’ite Hassan Nasrallah to the level of Arab historical leaders. They condemned their governments’ shortcomings, called upon them to rise to the occasion, and many openly expressed the wish to go and fight alongside the resistance.

There is no doubt that this public stance caused a lot of embarrassment to Arab officials and forced them to modify their policies, even if only superficially, in word rather than in deed, and to look for ways to prove that they were not remiss in their duty towards Lebanon. This, however, should not make us forget certain facts, the most important of which is that the Arab popular position is a ‘demonstration of public support’ arising from respect and admiration for the resistance, rather than an ‘effective movement’ that could exert pressure on decision makers and ruling elites, and force them to modify their policies. Thre are two reasons for this. The first is the crisis that currently affects the Arab masses, a subject difficult to assess and analyse in this context. The second is that civil society organizations, and in particular syndicates and unions, despite their honourable stance towards the resistance, have adopted the Arab regimes’ positions that ‘condemn’, ‘call for’ and ‘request the international community to assume its responsibilities’. They have, in general, shirked from taking the initiative and doing something worthwhile, even if symbolically, like the boycott by the Arab Workers’ Union of all American ships in Arab ports during the 1960 crisis surrounding the Egyptian vessel Cleopatra (see http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,894851,00.html; accessed 7 February 2008). The large gap between the latter position and the present one needs genuine assessment and consideration, because it could mean that the current crisis afflicts both the Arab official and unofficial orders, even if their respective ailments differ. For while the official Arab order has lost its direction, which means that its ensuing actions are misdirected, the unofficial one has maintained its bearings but is clearly incapable of preserving it, let alone consolidating it.

**Repercussions of the war in the Arab arena**

Needless to say, an attack as extensive as Israel’s on Lebanon in July–August 2006, and the resistance’s steadfastness in the face of it, coupled with its ability to inflict serious losses on Israel, have led to an outcome that neither Israel nor the United States had expected. This will undoubtedly have significant repercussions. We shall now attempt to introduce a number of ideas for discussion, focusing on three main areas: the official Arab system, the possible alternatives to that establishment, and the future of the Arab–Israeli conflict.

**The Arab system**

We shall consider four different points related to the leadership, development and integration of the Arab system, including the internecine conflict between its various members. The subject of alternative possibilities will be addressed separately.

During the crisis, the function of leadership within the establishment was clearly in the hands of Saudi Arabia, relying on the support of Egypt and Jordan. Saudi Arabia also took the initiative in blaming the resistance for the escalation, and thereafter charged it with the responsibility of bringing the conflict to an end. The Saudis were also responsible for backtracking as the war progressed and the
resistance's remarkable performance, and the large-scale Arab public support for it, became evident.

What is worth noting here is that this crisis marks an exception to the usual leadership role of the so-called Egyptian–Saudi–Syrian axis within the Arab system. This axis has played a role in many crises in the Arab world, notably in the 1955 confrontation with the Baghdad Pact, Iraqi claims over Kuwait in 1961, the October 1973 war, and the occupation of Kuwait in 1990. Strikingly, however, no such part was played in other important developments, such as the Arab–Israeli settlement following the October 1973 war, the June 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Iran–Iraq war from 1980 to 1988, and the American occupation of Iraq in 2003. The Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006 is another example of this axis’ lack of credibility, not to mention the fact that relations between its members were stretched to the limit on more than one occasion. We saw this happen in Saudi–Egyptian relations in the 1960s, in Egyptian–Syrian relations following Syria’s secession from the United Arab Republic in 1961, the Egyptian treaty with Israel signed by President Sadat in the late 1970s, and in various Saudi–Syrian crises, among which the present is the starkest.

These examples, and others, should dispel the notion that the Egyptian–Saudi–Syrian axis could play a useful leadership role within the Arab system. The influence of external factors on the positions taken is amply evident, given that the countries that took the initiative in opposing the resistance, or at least expressed reservations regarding it, are those that enjoy the closest relationship with the United States. It is also evident that Saudi Arabia is incapable of undertaking a leadership role within the Arab system through the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which itself experienced deep divisions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, divisions that culminated in an exchange of verbal attacks between officials of the two countries. Furthermore, other GCC members—even if less inimical towards the Saudi kingdom—have clearly opted to pursue different policies that demonstrate, at the least, a less critical attitude towards the resistance. This also proves the fragility of small subgroups within the Arab system, the most important of which, or rather the only one remaining one of which, is the GCC.

Most important of all, however, is that those who take initiatives within the establishment have failed to meet the expectations that come with leadership and in the final analysis the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 was mainly due to the resistance’s performance in the field. The failure to hold an emergency Arab summit when it was most needed revealed a chronic malaise within the Arab system, and the axis’ failure to garner the support of the Arab masses and political forces is but a natural consequence of this malaise. Even in Syria, which fully supported the resistance, the masses and political forces gave a rather reserved response to the highly rational attitude towards Syrian military calculations in any possible confrontation with Israel. Even those who recognized the importance of Syria’s military assistance to Hezbollah were not satisfied with the fact that Syria was not involved in the fighting.

In light of the above, one can say that there is a real leadership vacuum within the Arab system, and some see a candidate to fill that vacuum in the person of Hezbollah Secretary General, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, who, since the war, has enjoyed wide popularity among the Arab masses. We should distinguish, however, between a leadership role that allows Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah to exert pressure on...
Arab regimes, and the impossible task of leading the Arab political order, as long as the political infrastructure of the Arab regional system remains unchanged. Therefore it is only possible to speak of Hassan Nasrallah ‘influencing’ the Arab system but not leading it.

The issue of leadership is linked directly to reforming and developing the political structure from within. The Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006 took place at the height of the debate regarding reforms and changes in the Arab world and the political steps that should be taken. Although one cannot claim that substantial developments have taken place in this regard, it cannot be denied that there have been a few partial successes in some Arab countries. It is also entirely possible to view the resistance’s performance against Israel, and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah’s leadership model, as a moral boost for the forces of change in their fight against regimes that have been too long in power, plundered their countries’ wealth with little to show for it, and witnessed the deterioration of their citizens’ standards of living. It is, however, very difficult to predict the impact this will have on the movement towards reform and change in the Arab world, a matter that needs more time for consideration and debate.

The issue of integration within the Arab established political order needs special attention. The Israeli attack on Lebanon came at a time when talk about the regrettable fact of sectarianism in the Arab world in general, and Sunni-Shiite strife in particular, was already being heard. Events in Iraq are but the worst example of the divisions that could eventually afflict many Arab countries if this notion spreads further afield and prevails. This is where the need for a comprehensive Arab–Islamic discourse arises, a discourse led by someone of the weight and calibre of Hassan Nasrallah. The public support he enjoys crosses the sectarian divide, and his own personal discourse, appeals to both Christians and Muslims. This gives hope and a strong impetus to the notion of integration within the Arab order, provided the major necessary effort of political will is exerted.

The phenomenon of internal struggle is a chronic disease from which the Arab political establishment has suffered since its inception. It has vacillated through the years between bouts of conflict and bouts of solidarity, reacting to certain variables, the most important of which are threats coming from abroad. This particular variable has often helped bring parties within the order closer together, even if only temporarily, to face external threats (Ahmad 1996), even though this solidarity was nowhere to be found when the United States invaded and occupied Iraq.

It is clear, if the Arab–Israeli conflict is used as a measure, that defeat invites solidarity, while victory leads to periods of cold war among the Arabs. In 1950, following the 1948 defeat, the Joint Arab Defence and Economic Cooperation Treaty was signed, and the 1967 defeat witnessed one of the most notable periods of solidarity within the Arab political order. On the other hand, the Suez War of 1956 was followed by an Arab cold war that lasted until the 1967 defeat, interrupted by only brief periods of solidarity (the Arab summits of 1964 and 1965). The same happened again, but more clearly, following the 1973 war, which brought about one of the most intense periods of inter-Arab conflict. Egyptian President Sadat’s decision in 1975 to conclude a peace treaty with Israel created a rift that reached its peak in 1977–1979, and caused a total break in Arab–Egyptian relations that lasted an entire decade.
It seems that the most recent case (2006) will not be an exception to the rule. Hezbollah achieved a strategic victory over Israel and the Arab schism regarding positions towards Hezbollah emerged straightaway. As mentioned earlier, these divisions split the Arab ranks into two fronts: one, led by Syria, that supported the resistance, and the other, led by Saudi Arabia, that expresses reservations towards it, even condemns it. Then came the 8 August 2006 speech by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in which he stated that the war had ‘brought down the half-men and their half-positions’ and hinted that the March 14 forces in Lebanon were ‘made in Israel’, very much like the 17 May 1983 forces who supported the Israeli-Lebanese agreement on that day after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The speech attracted harsh political and media reaction in the ‘moderate’ Arab states, who considered themselves to be the target of Assad’s remarks, leading observers to suggest that a new era of Arab cold war had begun. There is no doubt that a new polarization is taking shape among the Arabs, even if the Arab regimes, and the international context in which they move, will not allow the enmity to reach the levels witnessed in the 1960s. There are clear signs that efforts are being made to reduce the current tensions and polarization, mainly because, if allowed to run free, their impact on a country like Lebanon could have disastrous consequences.

**Saryar Zalmout**

*Alternative regional systems*

The Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006 occurred within the context of American attempts to impose a new Middle East formula on the Arab world. American policy has been rather confusing given that its visions are constantly shifting between a ‘larger’ Middle East, a ‘greater’ Middle East, and still yet, a ‘new’ Middle East. Decades ago, during the Eisenhower administration, it was a ‘void’ Middle East, as in the ‘filling the void’ approach. In reality, the Middle Eastern notion has been a fundamental American concept since the end of World War II. In the process of reconfiguring the future of the region, this policy, which has represented an attempt to impose American hegemony over the region since the British and French Empires fell, was never able to come to terms, as the latter were, with the ties that bind the Arabs together. The reason for this is that historic experience shows that unity among the Arabs has always worked to their advantage as far as the regional and even international balance of power is concerned.

Although the insistence on a vision for the Middle East as the basis for the future of the region has remained constant in US policy, this vision’s contents have undergone several modifications which have reflected various shifts in American policies, up to the current state of animosity. The speed with which these modifications have been made has recently increased in light of the challenges that face the implementation of the vision.

American visions for the Middle East initially had economic, security and employment connotations, as witnessed by various Middle East projects, including the Johnston Project, the Baghdad Pact and the Eisenhower Doctrine in the 1950s. However, all these attempts failed thanks to the rising tide of Arab nationalism at that time.

The current American administration put the Middle East at the centre of its priorities, because, so it says, it is now a breeding ground for terrorism, especially following the 11 September 2001 attacks. The real reason, however, is that control of
the region’s oil lies at the heart of America’s strategic objective of maintaining and sustaining its uni-polar hegemony over the world in the present century. At the time, no target was more compelling than Iraq, given its oil wealth, and the fact that it was isolated after its wars with Iran and Kuwait and exhausted as a result of a decade of economic sanctions.

The American President did not hesitate to announce that he would make Iraq the spearhead of democratic reform and economic prosperity in the Middle East; it is at this point that the notion of the Middle East, as we know it today, started gradually taking shape. Although the real objective was America’s hegemony over the region, they claimed that they wanted to spread democracy and economic prosperity in the region, starting with Iraq, which would then serve as an example for others to follow. Iraq, however, confounded their plans; resistance against occupation on the one hand, and unwise American policies on the other, led to a debacle in the country they hoped to transform into a launching pad for their policies in the region. Thus, it became imperative for them to change tactics.

The occupation of Iraq took place in April 2003 and less than a year later, in February 2004 to be precise, it became clear that pretence was over, and that using Iraq as a launching pad to subdue the entire region was not to be. This is when the Greater Middle East Initiative (see for example http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2004/0510middleast_wittes.aspx [Accessed 11 February 2008]), based on the premise that there is an axis of evil in the region, exacerbated by rampant despotism, economic stagnation and cultural extremism, became the order of the day. The Americans justified their intention to transform the Middle East, which they saw as a hub of terrorism producing individuals like those who perpetrated the September 11 attacks, by referring to these ills, and decided that the cure lay in replacing the axis of evil with democracy, economic prosperity and an educational system that preached tolerance.

The paradox is that the Greater Middle East Initiative has put its finger on the real ills that plague the region, but the cure it offers is either nonsensical, wrong or superficial, to say the least. Neither should we forget America’s highly suspect record in the domain of spreading democracy, which shows that consecutive US administrations have seen democracy less as an end in itself than as a means by which to harass enemy regimes, while they turned a blind eye on the undemocratic behaviour of friendly rulers.

However, the most dangerous aspect of the Greater Middle East Initiative lies in the fact that it is the first American initiative in the Middle East that involves blatant intervention in the internal affairs of targeted countries. There is nothing more blatant than calling, even implicitly, for the change of regimes that the US deems unfriendly, and advocating a dose of ‘constructive chaos’ to pave the way for stability based on new and better foundations. The Initiative, however, faced stiff opposition from ruling elites, not to mention opposition from those who reject American hegemony on the region.

Thus the wings of the Greater Middle East Initiative gradually started to break and America came out of the G8 summit in June 2004 with a half-success and a half-failure. The latter was the failure to institutionalize the Initiative, and the former was the summit’s agreement to establish a so-called ‘Forum for the Future’ (see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3794561.stm [Accessed 11 February 2008]), which would meet on an annual basis and be attended by the foreign
ministers of the G8 countries and the region. The Forum actually held its first meeting in Rabat in December 2004, in the absence of Israel’s Foreign Minister, who received a clear message from the Moroccan people that he would not be welcome. At the meeting, participants summoned up their courage and demanded that conflicts in the region be resolved before attending to issues of internal reform. However, a meeting, held in Manama in December 2005 failed even to issue a final statement due to America’s insistence on sidestepping sovereign governments in the region, and granting financial assistance directly to civil society institutions active in the field of promoting democracy.

It thus became clear that the Greater Middle East Initiative would suffer the fate of those that preceded it, and end in failure. What is most troubling for the United States, however, is that democracy, when applied, brought to power (as in the case of Palestine) individuals not to America’s liking, or increased the share in power of such individuals (as in the case of Egypt and Kuwait). Thus, calls for democracy became a front, while it was obvious that the Middle East the US administration really wanted was an entirely ‘new’ one in which all those who stood in the way of American hegemony over the region would be wiped out. This puts into context the American–Israeli aggression on Lebanon, which, although it was executed by Israel, was American as far as planning, support and the provision of diplomatic cover were concerned. The US Secretary of State described the suffering caused by the attack as the ‘birth pangs of the new Middle East’. The harshness of her words, lacking all humanity, reveals what a ‘new’ Middle East will be like; it will be a region under American–Israeli hegemony and Israeli arrogance, shaped according to their own narrow interests.

However, the Israeli war on Lebanon supported by the US in 2006 dealt a fatal blow to the new Middle East America had envisaged. The reasons for this are twofold. First, it failed to eliminate forces that resisted American and Israeli hegemony over the region, thanks to Hezbollah, proving that it would be impossible to exclude them from the process of reshaping the region. Second, the resistance’s achievements came as a result of both internal and external factors: Iran’s support for Hezbollah, the most important external factor, means that, contrary to American hopes, it would be impossible to exclude Iran from the Middle East equation.

It is important to take a closer look at these two factors. The resistance is clearly present today within the Arab political order in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq. Its recent success in its confrontation with Israel has set a new precedent as far as the Arab–Israeli conflict is concerned, and, at the same time, the resistance movements in both Palestine and Iraq are standing firm and escalating their activities. This means that resistance against occupation and hegemony will leave an indelible imprint on the future of the region.

As for Iran, its presence on the Arab political scene is not new. Iran is present first of all in the many bridges it has built with Islamic movements throughout the Arab world, irrespective of sectarian barriers. Second, it has a presence in Arab Shi’ite sympathies and enthusiasm for the Iranian Revolution. Third, it is particularly present in the policies it has been pursuing since the 2003 occupation of Iraq, policies that have guaranteed it a role in the Iraqi equation. Fourth and last, Iran is present in its support for the Hamas government, at a time when many Arab countries have abandoned it to its fate.
The real significance of all this rests in the fact that when the Arab official political establishment failed to meet many of the requirements of its own security, Iran has, on more than one occasion, stepped in to fill the gap. Furthermore, while fear of Iran was being drummed up in the Arab world through slogans, such as the ‘the Shi'ite crescent’, the recent crisis brought down many of the barriers between Iran and large segments of the Arab intelligentsia and the masses, who have great admiration for Hezbollah, even if the accusations they level at it, namely that it is implementing an Iranian agenda, are true. Are Arab regimes themselves not implementing foreign agendas? Would the Iranian agenda not be identical to the Arab one had it been directed at Israel?

In light of the above, we may conclude that those concerned with the future of the Arab political order should embark upon a wide-ranging technical and political dialogue with a view of reshaping it and working out the role that Iran should play in it. They should find a proposal that meets the aims of both the Arabs and the Iranians, which naturally requires that both sides first change their attitude towards each other. However, for those currently in charge of Arab governments to continue believing that they can maintain the status quo, and preserve the bases on which their policies are founded, despite their obvious shortcomings, is simply a figment of the imagination.

Future of the Arab–Israeli conflict

The Arab–Israeli conflict will be one of the first scenarios to be affected by the Israeli war on Lebanon, given that the outcome of the war resulted from its successful prosecution by one of the most important of the Arab factions that oppose Israel. The implication is that the notion of resistance, as a culture and a means of fighting Zionist designs, has been reinforced. It is also no secret that the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifāda in September 2000 came only four months after the resistance’s victory in southern Lebanon in May of the same year.

On the strategic level, if Israel is sincere about wanting to live as a normal state in the region, there is no doubt that it lost a great deal in this war. Its attack on Lebanon proved, at least to the Arab masses, that coexistence with it poses a threat to security. The scale of the Israeli response to the kidnapping of two of its soldiers, while it holds thousands of Arab prisoners, can only, from the Arab point of view, portend increased polarization in the Arab–Israeli conflict in response to Hezbollah’s successful use of guerrilla tactics.

This view is supported by the fact that Hezbollah’s success in the war has pushed large portions of Israel’s public opinion and political parties further to the right, reflected in the rising popularity of Netanyahu at the expense of the current Prime Minister. In other words, extremism could plague both sides, and lead to further escalation and entrenchment. This should not prevent the conclusion of partial settlements, in the short and medium terms, such as an exchange of prisoners between Hezbollah and Israel, given the latter’s failure to secure its prisoners’ release by force. Neither should it prevent the conclusion of an Israeli–Lebanese general settlement, once Israel realizes that it cannot vanquish Lebanon militarily. Israel might conclude that it is more worth its while to neutralize Lebanon by means of a balanced settlement, which would then allow it to devote its energy to the Palestinian and Syrian fronts. As for progress in the search for a comprehensive settlement of
the Middle East conflict, that would require manoeuvring far more complex and
difficult than the latest round of fighting. It would actually demand a qualitative
shift in Israeli public opinion and politics towards the realization that Israel will not
be able to defeat the Arabs strategically, or sideline them from the conflict. Israel
should also realize that only a fair settlement will do and that it will have to make
painful concessions rather than the trivial ones — which it only describes as painful
to justify its hard position and maybe help its negotiators save face.

This article has tried to address, from an Arab perspective, the most salient
points of the varied and interconnected repercussions of the 2006 Israeli war on
Lebanon. Needless to say, it is vitally important for the future of the Arab political
order to pursue the debate round this important issue and build on the success of the
resistance in the recent war. So far, however, the Arab system seems to lack the
elements that would enable it to do so. If it insists on remaining inactive, it will be
incapable of withstanding the wave of change sweeping through it from within, or
the forces standing at the sidelines waiting for the opportunity to jump in and fill the
void.

Notes
1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Centre for Arab Unity Studies’
   seminar on “The Israeli War on Lebanon: Repercussions on Lebanon, Israel, the Arab
   World, the Region and Internationally”.

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