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# No peace, again, among the olive trees

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By the time this briefing is published, the military confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah probably will not be over. However, even before there is a ceasefire, some conclusions of a general nature can be drawn concerning the situation in the Middle East and the fate of the conflict that has dragged on for half a century.

## *First conclusion: No changes are to be expected*

Peace in the Middle East should not be expected. The “roadmap” can be discarded, and a new solution for a settlement needs to be worked out.

The paradox is that everybody wants peace. In February, 70% of Palestinians were in favor of the continuation of negotiations with Israel, and 80% were in favor of a truce. The Israelis were also tired of the conflict. But after the lulls that presaged hope, each time the conflict started up again with new vigor. The unsolved issues still remain insoluble — the status of Jerusalem, the return of the Palestinian refugees, and the withdrawal of Israel from the Golan Heights. And, of course, the recognition of Israel.

The electoral victory of the Islamist Hamas interrupted the peace process all together. The Hamas faction gained a victory after Israel withdrew from Gaza and abandoned its settlements. The “exodus” was predetermined. Israel long ago was unable to control the territories around its settlements, and it is not advantageous for it to disperse its forces. The Islamist victory cannot be interpreted as a result of the pliancy of the Israeli government. Rather, it is primarily the result of the Palestinians’ disillusionment with the policies of Yasser Arafat’s helpless and corrupt successors. But very many people continue to think that Hamas achieved its victory simply because of the “weakness” of its adversary, and one cannot disregard this conviction.

Israel refused to give in to the Islamists. If, originally, Israeli society had hopes for a possible compromise, they have nearly evaporated. Today, despite being tired, society instinctively feels the need to resurrect the fighting spirit. In Israel, a whole generation of soldiers has grown up that has never had the taste of victory over their Arab enemies. Nearly forty years have passed since the famous Six Day War of 1967, while the war of 1973 was only partly a triumph for Israel.

It has been said that in recent years the number of draft-dodgers has been on the rise. One can understand them: it is impossible to wait all your life to be called up. But the unexpected happened in July, and patriotism, which had been greatly weakened during the years of domestic political intrigues, enjoyed a rebirth.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the political elite must now show their teeth. Olmert’s authority, as well as his tenure in power, increasingly depends on his decisiveness. The ex-Premier, Ariel Sharon, nicknamed “Bulldozer”, who had fought since 1948 — during the June War he commanded an armored division — and started the Jewish settlements, could afford to refrain from always ramming through. Olmert does not have such a heavyweight image.

The hostage-taking of Corporal Gilad Shalit led to the military operation in Gaza. And the capture of two military men by Hezbollah (Israel also calls them hostages, and Hezbollah considers them prisoners of war) led to a real war under the name of Operation “Appropriate Retribution”.

Could Israel act otherwise? On the one hand, it could. After all, hostages have been taken before. And often (although not always) an agreement was reached. On the other hand, to enter negotiations now would imply showing weakness. In some sense, Israel’s fury is not simply a reaction to the failure to achieve a compromise with the Palestinians, but a demonstration that the Israeli state has never lost the art of conducting a real war. Neither the



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domestic political situation, nor the relationship with its neighbors, permits Israel to relax. In fact, Israel is squeezed between Islamist “pincers”. It seems that its critics in Europe and the United Nations, as well as, for certain, in the Muslim world, understand this perfectly well.

Up to now, a broad cooperation between Hamas and Hezbollah was not in the cards. The Palestinians have had their own goals, and the Lebanese Shiites theirs. However, coordination of efforts is quite possible. Either way, they share a common enemy, and this enemy is not going to surrender.

The situation, to put it bluntly, is quite difficult for both sides in the conflict. Hezbollah will not gain a military victory. Its forces are insufficient. But Israel will not defeat Hezbollah within a week, three weeks or even a month. (In 1994, one country demonstrated what happens when you attempt to capture a town with a single paratroop regiment. This country was Russia, the city was the Chechen capital Grozny, and the military operation continued for years.) Yes, eventually, Hezbollah’s military infrastructure will be considerably disrupted for some time and its artillery positions will be destroyed. But, even with a victory on the battlefield, Israel will never destroy Hezbollah as a political organization, just as it is impossible to destroy, for instance, the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, Hezbollah is most likely at some stage to win overwhelming support among the Shiites, who make up 40% of the Lebanese population (and after the Israeli bombing, support may extend beyond just the Shiites.) Israel reckons, judging at least by what it says, that after the confrontation is over, the Lebanese army will take control over the south of its country. However, up to now this territory was controlled by Hezbollah. The only real alternative to Hezbollah would be an international security force.

In July 2006 something happened that, in the background to the thunder of the bombs and Katyushas, probably not everybody noticed. Belief in the effectiveness of compromise was lost. After this war there will only be mutual suspicion and even greater anger, and these feelings are not likely to be eradicated for the next few generations. The resolution of the Middle East conflict will once again become an illusion.

### ***Second conclusion: Nobody wanted to go to war***

On the other hand, there will not be a fifth big Middle East war.

What is this big war? It is a war against Israel conducted simultaneously by several Arab countries, with active political intervention by outside players — the United States, Russia and Europe. In these circumstances, some of them would support Israel, and some the Arabs.

Is the Arab world ready for such a turn of events? Specifically, are the conflict’s closest neighbors — Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq prepared for it? The first three of these countries would see such a war as a nightmare. And they have no desire to support the Islamists, either the Sunnis of Hamas or, even less, the Shiites of Hezbollah. The Egyptian president and the Jordanian and

Saudi Arabian monarchs are beleaguered by their own fundamentalists threatening to overthrow them. Yes, money would be donated (the Saudis have already promised Lebanon \$500 million), and there would be harsh criticism of the Israeli aggressor. But generals in Egypt or elsewhere would not fight for the cause of either Hamas or Hezbollah.

Iraq is not even worth mentioning: they have got their hands full. There, hollering Sunnis blow up and kidnap peaceful Shiites, shoot Americans and butcher Russian diplomats.

That leaves Syria. Its material and moral support for Hezbollah will not extend sufficiently to enable another anti-Israel front to be opened. Bashar al-Assad is too clever to risk the relationship with the Americans as well as his own regime. This is because for Syria a war is unlikely to finish with a victory — i.e. the return of the Golan Heights. And without this, there would be a threat to Assad Jr.’s remaining in power.

Finally, which Arab leader would take the risk of raising his right hand against Israel in the absence of the USSR? There was a time when Saddam Hussein took his chance by launching a couple of rockets towards Israel. And now he is awaiting a verdict (ostensibly, for the sum of his actions). And it is not as though some one would appeal to China.

Next, to some additional “miscellaneous” points.

The United States does not need a war. They certainly have enough on their plate with Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and bin Laden. And a Muslim-Israeli war hardly fits in with the current American discussion of democratization in the Middle East.

Europe has never wanted to damage its relationship with the Arabs. For the Europeans the war might result in revolts of Muslim immigrants.

As far as Russia is concerned, in the case of an outbreak of a big war, Russia would have no position at all. In truth, many domestic politicians, rubbing their hands, would once again gladly engage in bashing America. But Moscow would not benefit, if only because of its inability to exert any effective influence on the course of events.

The only way Russia could gain from the war would be because of a rise in oil prices. But Russia has a lot of money as it is. (By the way, in 1967 *The New York Times* published the “slander” that Soviets stealthily were receiving benefits from the embargo on Arab oil. In response to these accusations, the minister of foreign trade of the USSR, Nikolai Patolichev, remarked that “all these allegations are purely fabrications.”)

Thus, there will not be a big war. But one can not exclude that, in its absence, terrorists will become active again. The probability of this “asymmetric response” by radical Islamists is far more serious. Cooperation between Sunnis and Shiites along these lines could become a reality. Who would be affected by this blow? Not only the United States, although they would be the first. As for the second and third, it could be anybody who is vulnerable, and everybody is vulnerable. One has only to remember what happened with the Russian diplomats in Iraq, and recall that Moscow bears no responsibility for what has been going on in that country.

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Some people think that talking about terrorism these days provokes it. This may be true. But it is more important nevertheless to anticipate all the consequences of the current “minor war,” which, out of the blue, has befallen the Middle East and the rest of the world.

### **Third conclusion: The hand of Teheran**

The Middle East conflict long ago became embedded into the system of geopolitical relations and will remain so. Today, this platitude has acquired an additional aspect: this conflict is suitable for use as an instrument to solve other, formally unrelated issues.

Let us ask ourselves, why does Hezbollah need this war? Why was it provoking Israel, knowing in advance that the reaction would be deadly impassioned? It looks as though the calculation was based on precisely this expectation. But was this calculation actually made by Hezbollah, which after 2000 has positioned itself as fairly respectable? Whatever the case, Hezbollah is nothing like Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades or Islamic Jihad. In the context of Islamism, its program is moderate: it is not striving to establish an Islamic state today and does not insist on the obligatory wearing of the traditional veil by women.

Perhaps the main instigator of the Hezbollah-Israeli carnage resides in Teheran? There are several bases for such a hypothesis. In the first place, the war distracts the attention of the United States and Europe from the Iranian nuclear program, while simultaneously demonstrating the strength of Iran’s allies. Furthermore, Iran is gaining authority among Muslims, including the Arabs, which is what it has been dreaming of for a long time, as it aspires to the leading role in Islam. This is also vitally important for Iran in order to feel more confident in its negotiations with the West.

There is another hypothesis and, if it is confirmed, everything would fall into place: if it so happens that the nuclear program negotiations once again reach deadlock, Iran, in a gesture of goodwill, might undertake to put pressure on Hezbollah, thus compensating for the uncompromising attitude over the nuclear issue, which has exasperated everybody. To put it bluntly, Iran could trade Hezbollah for... time will tell for what. Thus, the Middle East conflict could turn out to be a new card for Teheran to play.

From that vantage point, one can better understand the restraint of the Arab leaders, who have no wish to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for their Shiite coreligionists.

### **Fourth conclusion: Going twice into the same river?**

The lineup of forces around the unsolved “major” conflict and development of the “minor” conflict is painfully reminiscent of what the older generation learned from Soviet newspapers. “The aggressor and its patrons,” the leading Soviet daily *Pravda* wrote in 1967. “Lenin’s course against aggression,” echoed *Izvestia*. The USSR supported the Arabs selflessly. This support was material, to use the language of the now-defunct newspaper *Za Rubezhom* (*Abroad*), “help from a friend,” the remnants of which remain to this day in Syria, Iraq, and with the Palestinians.

Today, Russia still supports some Arab countries, but this support has wilted. The supply of armaments bears no comparison to Soviet times, and Russia’s role in the Middle East conflict is constrained to rhetoric and Muslim-communist demonstrations in front of the American embassy.

In short, if some time ago Moscow banged the geopolitical table with its fist, today it just makes rude gestures, and it makes little difference whether it gestures under the table or in plain sight. What forty years ago looked like a tragedy today is turning out to be a farce.

The Arab politicians in the Middle East understand this perfectly well: they thank Russia for its solidarity in a ceremonial way, but see very clearly that its role in settling local conflicts is miniscule.

Sadly, the attempt that had seemed to be quite justifiable and serious — to become a mediator between radical Islam and its western opponents — is collapsing. A flirtation with Hamas came to nothing. Islamic radicals gave Moscow a bloody slap in Baghdad, having murdered Russian diplomats (while none of the Islamist institutions lifted a finger to rescue these people, or the image of Russia). Russia is being consistently let down by Iran, whose “friendship” with Moscow is, for the most part, a ruse to obtain concessions from the Americans.

There is simply no role to be found for Russia in the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah.

At the end of July, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) issued a list of 17 terrorist organizations, which included neither Hamas nor Hezbollah. However, this is not a courtesy towards the Arabs, but yet another challenge to the Americans. Russia publicly announced that it fights only with its own enemies. This means that the anti-terrorist coalition, which for a long time used to be a favorite cause of Putin, has lost nearly all its importance in his eyes.

Nonetheless, Russia treats the Israeli position with hidden understanding. The oft-quoted threat that Putin once used in his speech about terrorists, “we’ll wipe them out in the toilet,” is not just a strategy but a *cri de coeur* that is still echoing in the ears of Israeli politicians. Israel’s “patience has simply been exhausted,” the Chairman of the Duma Committee on International Affairs, Konstantin Kosachev, remarked. I think that many Russian politicians, including those who are not supposed to talk out loud about this, hold the same opinion.

In the Middle East, the initiative has fallen to the Americans, who speak from pro-Israeli positions. Condoleeza Rice is shuttling around the region, presenting everybody with her happy smile, but Sergei Lavrov is not. The US position is clear and understandable: to get rid of Hezbollah through Israel’s actions, to weaken the positions of Islamic radicals in the region, to give a severe warning to Iran and Syria and, finally, after the victory, to restore the house of cards of a Middle East settlement.

The plan looks wonderful. But, to be honest, it is difficult to believe in its rapid strategic success. The Americans’ geopolitical fervor does not compare to that in the previous century, when the Soviet big brother loomed close behind

the backs of the Arabs. Maybe they miss having a serious adversary?

After the air raid shelter was destroyed in Cana on 30 July, and dozens of Arab children were killed, Condoleeza Rice decided not to go to Beirut. She did the right thing: she might not have been allowed in. America will have to justify the “inappropriateness” of Israeli actions. This irritates America, though no one would talk about it.

The Europeans are being cautious. They are used to this. After the Suez Crisis as far back as in 1956, their position became permanently intermediate. So intermediate, in fact, that Europe constantly hears itself accused of anti-Semitism. In any case, the continental pragmatists proceed from the assumption that a normal relationship with the Muslims will bring them more dividends than obligatory loyalty towards Israel. Even Germany, which has repeatedly asked for forgiveness for the Holocaust, does not consider itself irrevocably bound to demonstrate solidarity with the Israeli people.

Any comparisons are faulty, but all the same the atmosphere surrounding the clash between Israel and Hezbollah can be compared to the discussion of the Iranian nuclear program. If it were not for the European–Russian indecisiveness, the fate of Teheran could be resolved. A united front could be built up against Teheran and even the super-radical but cunning Ahmadinejad would have to concede.

Among Moscow, Paris, Berlin, Madrid and even Brussels, consensus has been restored. I would interpret this as a nearly intimate understanding, almost without speaking. As in years past, this encourages the Arabs and distresses Israel.

All of this testifies that the total divergence of views on the Middle East conflict not only remains, but, in a critical situation, could widen even further.

So it was. So it is. So it will be. The positions of the parties to the conflict, both those directly involved and those distant from the scene of the events, are being reprised.

### *How the current “round” will end*

The general assessments and prognoses about this “major conflict” have long ago become unimaginative. That is why I would suggest to the reader a short-term forecast, which you can disprove or verify independently over the coming weeks.

First, the war will come to an end, thousands of people will be killed, but each of the participants, irrespective of the outcome, will proclaim himself the victor.

Second, each winner will be a loser. Hezbollah, after the growth in its popularity, will have to explain to the Lebanese why it instigated the confrontation with Israel. Israel’s leadership will have to justify to its people the price of victory.

Third, Israel will once again be doomed to suffer a wave of terrorism, which its adversaries will justify as revenge for the death of Arab children.

Fourth, the inevitable forced contacts with Islamists will be even more difficult.

Fifth, a 20-km buffer zone will certainly be established between Lebanon and Israel, which will remain a “permanently temporary” palliative, testifying to the conflict’s insolubility.

Sixth, Europe and Russia will distance themselves more from Israel, finding an easy justification in Jerusalem’s “inappropriate response” to Hezbollah’s trouble-making. While the French insist on entering negotiations immediately, the Americans talk of creating due preconditions, which reflects their hope for a quick Israeli victory. And this means that unity over a Middle East settlement cannot be expected.

*This briefing reflects solely the views of its author and not the views of the Carnegie Moscow Center or the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.*

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