

Bunch of Losers

By Col. Daniel Smith, U.S. Army (Ret.) | August 29, 2006

*I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert ...
And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”*

-Percy Bysshe Shelley

On August 14 at 7:55 in the morning Beirut and Tel Aviv time, the last Israeli artillery shells and Hezbollah rockets were fired, exploding roughly a minute later. Then the guns fell silent. The cease-fire started exactly on time at 8:00 am.

So too, did the claims of victory.

After 33 days of killing, destroying lives and livelihoods, and creating another generation all too ready to wreak revenge on “enemies,” all sides in the conflict lost, though some lost more than others. The losers include Israel, Hezbollah, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, the United States, the UN, and the innumerable millions whose lives will be worse because billions of dollars of potential economic assistance instead went into war or will go into preparing for future conflict.

Any country can proclaim itself a winner. As the “two vast and trunkless legs of stone” in Shelley’s poem *Ozymandias* eloquently demonstrates, victory is an ephemeral claim that invites a parade of constantly shifting challengers until, eventually, the king of the mountain is toppled. More beneficial than assessing blame is to dissect what was lost and by whom—in both a tactical and a strategic sense—with an eye toward moving beyond the *status quo ante* in the Middle East.

Israel: A Myth Shattered

Tactically, the inability of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) to rout Hezbollah from the Litani River south to the Lebanese border with Israel—in some places not even dislodging Hezbollah from the border villages—was both a physical and a psychological defeat as well as a political fiasco for the government. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his cabinet had assured Israelis that the danger from rocket and missile attacks on the northern Israeli settlements would end when Hezbollah was forced beyond the 18-20 mile range of their Katyusha rockets.

Strategically, the 58-year aura of the IDF’s invincibility (albeit a bit suspect since Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from south Lebanon in May 2000) has been exposed as a myth—at least throughout the Arab world. Psychologically, the IDF will probably become even more inclined to recommend the early and the maximum use of force in dealing with the Hamas-dominated government in the



Occupied Territories and with Syrian or Hezbollah/Lebanese “provocations.” Israel will also move quickly to replace destroyed equipment, and the United States will supply all requested munitions, including “precision” and cluster munitions.

That a non-state military and not a conventional army or combined national armies fought the IDF to an apparent standstill has, at least temporarily, energized and unified the Arab street. To the extent that this translates into new recruits for extremist organizations—which may not be apparent for months—Israel (and the world) has lost ground in the effort to reduce future armed conflict. A more ominous development is also possible in those countries that feel threatened by Western-style militaries: the spread of separate, highly trained, and highly motivated forces of irregular combatants whose asymmetrical tactics could neutralize the combat power of conventional armies. Although more like Iran’s Revolutionary Guard than Hezbollah’s “state within a state,” such irregular forces would similarly complicate conventional military operations.

But acquiring such a capability while maintaining a regular army means diverting huge amounts of money and human talent that could otherwise have alleviated the root causes of war: lack of personal and familial security, reliable and affordable health care, education, and employment and income security. The inevitable outcome would be the *status quo ante*—again. More nations would have more war-fighting options armed with new and more powerful weapons.

Hezbollah: Unsustainable Myth

At the tactical level, Hezbollah feels that it “won” decisively. Psychologically, it did something that no other Arab military force has been able to do: fight the Israelis to a standstill over the course of 33 days

of combat. Hezbollah was still launching more than 150 Katyusha rockets per day right up to the time the UN-brokered ceasefire went into effect.

The question for Hezbollah now is: what next for its fighting force? That force has gained renown for its battlefield stand, and those who participated will likely be held in high esteem for as long as they live. The mistake Hezbollah could make is to buy into the myth, which will eventually arise, that having held the IDF once, the militia could do it again—and perhaps even “defeat” the IDF. It is a myth in the making because, among many questionable military decisions by Tel Aviv, the IDF reserves were slow to mobilize. Israel will not likely make that mistake again.

Strategically, Hezbollah can credibly claim to be a new center of resistance to what is increasingly seen in the Middle East as an anti-Islamic U.S.-Israeli axis. It is already clear that it will retain some military capacity. It will resist the wholesale relocation of its fighters and heavier weapons north of the Litani River. It will also try to sidestep UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1701 and “disarm” by collecting and storing its weapons in “armories” south of the Litani—while it goes about restoring its social support structure and funneling money to those whose homes were destroyed in the fighting. Hezbollah will also resist surrendering houses and villages to the Lebanese army and the expanded UNIFIL (UN Interim Force in Lebanon).

Outside of its strongholds in southern Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut, Hezbollah has lost considerable political ground. They are blamed for provoking Israel’s devastating air and sea bombardment of critical infrastructure throughout the whole of Lebanon. Not only foreigner tourists fled the fighting. Businesses that had been thinking about moving to or returning to Lebanon are reconsidering. Tens of thousands of Lebanese with

critical skills who were able to leave the country reportedly do not intend to return. Hezbollah's war—as many Lebanese regard the latest conflict—may turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory politically.

Lebanon: A Lost Generation?

Any evaluation of this war's impact on Lebanon must go back at least to 1990. After 15 years of a brutal civil war that killed an estimated 7% of the entire population, the country finally found relative peace under the watchful eye of some 16,000 Syrian troops. This occupation lasted until mid-2005, when Damascus came under suspicion of complicity in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister and entrepreneur Rafik Hariri. In the resulting international uproar, Damascus was forced to withdraw the last of its troops and intelligence operatives from Lebanon.

As the country entered 2006, hopes were high that this year would see a major influx of tourists, comparable to the pre-civil war days when Beirut was known as the “Paris of the Orient.” The first bombs that fell in south Lebanon turned the dream into a nightmare. One lesson of World War II was that indiscriminate bombing of major urban centers tends to unite rather than demoralize the civilian population. To a significant degree, Israel's aerial campaign did exactly that. When the low-level tit-for-tat skirmishes finally exploded into sustained war, the brunt of the destruction fell on south Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut, especially the non-Hezbollah villages and towns in the area between the Litani River and the border with Israel. While it was under way, this bombing pattern only increased popular support for Hezbollah.

Another important result that may yet come from this war will straddle the tactical and the strategic. Because Hezbollah was and is Lebanese, albeit financed and supplied by foreign sources as well as

by overseas remittances, it is entitled to field candidates to participate in Lebanon's political and economic processes. If Hezbollah can claim responsibility for the rapid restoration of the infrastructure destroyed by the war—which it appears to be doing faster than the Beirut government—it may succeed in realigning political power in favor of the Lebanese Shi'ite bloc.

The current allocation of the top three national offices rests on the last national census held in 1932. A power-sharing agreement reached in 1949 and modified in 1989 allocated the presidency to the Maronite Christians, the prime minister to the Sunnis, and the speaker of the parliament to the Shi'ites. The general consensus today is that Shi'ites comprise an estimated 40% of Lebanon's population, but they are allocated the weakest of the top three positions in the government. Should Hezbollah's “victory” become the catalyst for a new census, followed by another redistribution of power among the country's confessional blocs, Israel may find it must deal with a government whose leaders are members of an organization that appears on Washington's and Tel Aviv's lists of terrorist organizations—as does Hamas in the National Palestine Authority.

Syria: Under Pressure

“In a vise” seems an apt description of Syria's situation. To the north lies Turkey, a NATO ally of the United States. To the south lies Jordan, another U.S. ally. To the east is U.S.-dominated Iraq. And to the west, following the coast, are Israel, a major non-NATO U.S. ally, and Lebanon, whose young democracy is of special concern to Washington. Syria's only boundary not shared with a U.S. ally or country of “special interest” is a stretch of 120 miles of coastline on the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, considering the alignment of the next

tier of surrounding countries—Afghanistan, Iran, the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Greece, and Bulgaria—only Iran can be said to lie outside the U.S. sphere.

However, Syria, like Hezbollah, may only have to hang on to eventually emerge from this isolation. In the meantime, it is ideally situated to continue acting as a transfer hub for military equipment small enough to be flown into airfields on non-military cargo planes (thereby avoiding attention), for trained fighters, and for monetary aid destined either for Iraq to be used against the United States or for Hezbollah as it rebuilds. Under UNSC Resolution 1701, no weapons are to enter Lebanon unless authorized by the Beirut government for the army or for UNIFIL. Key for Lebanon will be the capacity and the willingness of the Lebanese Army—and the mandate for the expanded UNIFIL—to monitor what comes into the country from Syria.

In George Bush's view of the world, Syria automatically qualifies as a state sponsor of terror and, therefore, beyond the pale because of its support of Hezbollah. The U.S. State Department is quick to point out that Washington has normal diplomatic relations with Damascus. The State Department doesn't say that the U.S. embassy is being run by the charge d'affaires and not by the ambassador. The State Department also claims that ordinary communications flow between the embassies and appropriate ministries in each capital city. The Syrian ambassador to the United States, however, says there are no regular exchanges. The ambassador's claim has been implicitly confirmed by Richard Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State during George Bush's first term, who said, "The administration has an irrational fear that talking is a sign of weakness."

Iran: The Phoenix Rises

For more than 25 years, since Iranian students stormed the U.S. embassy compound in Tehran and held embassy personnel hostage for nearly 450 days, the United States has considered the Tehran theocracy a state sponsor of terror and a mortal enemy. For their part, the ayatollahs not only see the United States as the Great Satan but regard Washington as a resolute adversary for supporting Saddam Hussein during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. Eighteen years after that war ended, the clerics are still in Tehran and Saddam is gone, deposed by a United States now mired in a "long war" with no end in sight. Objectively, Iran's position in the region and in the global market is stronger than it has been for the last quarter century.

Washington accused Tehran of funding and supplying weapons to Hezbollah and of dictating the mode, time, and tactics of Hezbollah's action on July 12. That degree of control seems highly unlikely given the history of similar Hezbollah efforts to capture Israelis for the purpose of exchanging prisoners. In fact, even though most observers credit Hezbollah's disciplined stand to Iranian training, Tehran may have been surprised by the tenacity and originality of the Hezbollah fighters—a "success" that strengthens Iran's standing simply because it has been Hezbollah's chief supporter.

Iran's enhanced strength will soon be tested. Washington and the European three (Britain, France, and Germany) believe that Tehran is using its nuclear energy program to conceal the more ominous development of nuclear weapons as a counterbalance to Israel's stockpile. Earlier this summer, the UN Security Council demanded that Iran end all activities related to uranium enrichment and open all its nuclear facilities to inspection

by the International Atomic Energy Agency. The UN deadline for a reply from Iran is the end of August. Tehran “unofficially” responded on August 22 by rejecting the UN demand, but the UN seems content to wait until the end of August before taking further steps.

It might seem that Iran has come out the “winner” from the 33-day war in Lebanon. But according to credible media reports, the Pentagon had drawn up plans for an intensive air campaign to destroy Iran’s nuclear weapons complexes. The operations plan allegedly mirrors, albeit on a broader scale, the Israeli plan to destroy deeply buried Hezbollah command, control, communications, and equipment storage bunkers. Israel’s inability to destroy or at least isolate these buried facilities ought to give pro-war U.S. leaders pause. But some may push for a U.S. “preventive” strike as soon as possible after the August 31 deadline has expired to prevent construction of additional underground facilities and air defenses, assuming no new discussions are started that might lead to Iran ending its uranium enrichment program.

The United States: Rethinking Tactics and Strategy

The United States is bogged down in Iraq. The world’s last remaining superpower is being challenged, along with troops drawn largely from other NATO countries, by a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan. And Israel, the primary U.S. military client state with which it exchanges intelligence, develops weapons, and shares similar war-fighting philosophies and tactics, was held to a draw by a trained, dug-in, resilient militia employing light infantry weapons and motivated to defend its land and homes.

The Bush administration has badly overplayed its hand both tactically and strategically. Tactically, it

has remained tied to open terrain warfare characterized by heavy, long-range bombardment (air and artillery) followed by rapid, long-distance maneuvers that result in the psychological and physical defeat of enemy forces (as was attempted in Afghanistan and Iraq). It is repeating the mistake of the Vietnam War by failing to appreciate that a foreign army opposing an insurgency is automatically at a disadvantage because it is fighting in someone else’s land and will tend to be judged more strictly for the death and destruction it causes.

Strategically, the Bush administration came into power believing that the application of overwhelming military power could remake the entire Middle East. The new administration thought it could accomplish this remapping by removing the two main challenges to U.S. national security. The first was energy dependency. The second was the continuing strife between Israel and supporters of anti-Israel organizations and states. Whenever this latent violence flared into open warfare, U.S. interests throughout the Arab world were implicitly—if not explicitly—threatened. The administration’s “solution” turned on the “road map” for the existing “two-state” solution—but with a twist added by Tel Aviv. Israel could have safe borders and peace if the Palestinian state could be isolated from all but a minimum degree of contact—and that controlled by Israel—with the Jewish state. This was the Sharon solution, accepted by Bush and first implemented in 2005 in the Gaza Strip.

Ozymandius Redux

Men who are great or who aspire to greatness—and that includes every U.S. president—are often obsessed with the question of how they will be judged by history. Looking out from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue (or from the Western White

House in Crawford, Texas), George Bush must be wondering whether his presidency will be known more for its failures than its “successes.” With less than 30 months left in his second term, Iraq is unfinished business as is Afghanistan. The United States is reviled publicly and privately for its lack of objectivity during the just-concluded Hezbollah-Israeli war. The Six-Party Talks concerning North Korea’s nuclear weapons program are stalled. Darfur remains unresolved.

Looking down the road, Syria remains a possible flash point, depending on how well it conforms to strictures in UNSC Resolution 1701. But Iran is the next scheduled crisis. The White House seems eager to keep this confrontation on the diplomatic track for as long as possible. Every indication points to deep reservations by U.S. military professionals that the forces have been overcommitted, and allies in the “coalitions” are pulling their forces out or may soon announce plans to withdraw

because of mounting casualties. In fact, the rising number of U.S. casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan seem to be the reason for the shift in the U.S. public’s view of these wars.

When the mighty fail, they fail on a large scale. So it appears that the United States may be the biggest loser of all in the aftermath of the Lebanon war. The U.S. plans to remake the Middle East are rapidly conforming to the pattern laid down by Ozymandias:

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

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